

# We Are Here

## Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust

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From the beginning of *We Are Here*:

A soft summer rain was falling as a white-haired woman made her way to the microphone. “Tayere talmidim!” she began. “Dear students!” Through the pattering of drops on my umbrella, I leaned forward to catch her words. The old woman’s name was Bluma, a flowery name that matched her flowered dress. She was a member of the all-but-vanished Jewish community in Vilnius, Lithuania, the city once known as the Jerusalem of the North. “How fortunate I am,” she said in a quavering voice. “I have lived long enough to see people coming back to Vilnius to study Yiddish.”

Seventy-five of us – students of all ages from all over the globe – huddled on the wooden benches that were clustered together on wet cobblestones. Around us, the damp walls of Vilnius University rose into the heavens. As the rain continued to fall, I shivered. It was a complicated place, this land of my ancestors – a place where Jewish culture had once flourished, and a place where Jews had been annihilated on a massive scale.

My reasons for being here were not simple. I had come to learn Yiddish and to connect myself with my roots – the Jewish ones, that is, on my mother’s side. (On my father’s side, my non-Jewish forebears hailed from Ireland, England, and Bavaria – hence my name, Cassedy, and my blue eyes and freckles.) But I had other goals, too. I wanted to investigate a troubling family story I’d stumbled upon in preparing for my trip. I had agreed to meet a haunted old man in my ancestral town. And I planned to examine how the people of this country – Jews and non-Jews alike – were confronting their past in order to move forward into the future. What had begun as a personal journey had broadened into a larger exploration. Investigating Lithuania’s effort to exhume the past, I hoped, would help me answer some important questions.

When my mother was alive, I could count on her to keep hold of the past. But after she died, all those who’d gone before seemed to be slipping out of reach. I found myself missing the sound of Yiddish, the Jewish *mame-loshn*, or mother tongue, that she had sprinkled into conversation like a spice. At the window on a rainy day: “A *pliukhe* (a downpour)!” In the kitchen: “Hand me a *shisl* (a bowl).” On the telephone: “The woman’s a *makhsheyfe* (a witch).”

Once my mother was gone, I felt bereft – of her, and of the homey sounds that had once resounded in Jewish kitchens, lanes, meeting halls, and market squares on both sides of the Atlantic. My desire for Yiddish developed into a craving. I wanted to speak it and read it, to understand, write, sing. I signed up for evening classes at the nearby Jewish community center, worrying that at forty, I was too old for language study. The Germanic sounds felt comfortable in my mouth, though, and the Hebrew alphabet was daunting but not impossible. While my

children did their homework at the dining room table, I did mine, plodding through textbooks, copying out grammar exercises, thumbing my dictionary till the binding broke.

Raised in a mixed marriage by secular parents, I had never attended Hebrew school or recited blessings on Friday nights. Now, studying Yiddish felt like an act of devotion. Yiddish was the everyday Jewish idiom, not the language of religious texts. Yet to me it embodied sacred values. Yiddish was the language that great writers had used to convey stirring humanist ideas to an audience of “common folk.” It was the language that had united activist Jews in movements for social change in Europe and North America. Studying Yiddish signified that ordinary life mattered, that humble people and their humble daily lives had meaning and would not be forgotten.

Once described as “the linguistic homeland of a people without a home,” Yiddish began to offer me the sense of continuity that had been ruptured by my mother’s death. My husband, who’d been raised in Baltimore’s Jewish community, sensed how important it had become for me, and so did our two children. Yiddish became a cherished presence in our household.

My mother would have been surprised, to put it mildly. In the Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood where she grew up, Yiddish was about ignorance and poverty. English – perfect English – held the place of honor. Yes, she enjoyed pronouncing the occasional Yiddish phrase. But what was most important to her was to break free of the world of *yidishkayt* (traditional Jewish culture) with its Old World accent and inflections and the immigrant culture they represented. Now here I was, training my tongue to master that very idiom.

I was not the only one. A robust community of Yiddish enthusiasts in Washington, D.C., welcomed me with open arms. I joined a reading group that tackled the classic tales by Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz; we did our best to speak only Yiddish from the first “*gutn ovnt*” (“good evening”) to the final “*gute nakht*” (“good night”). I became a member of the National Yiddish Book Center, visited the Workmen’s Circle bookstore when I was in New York, and logged on to “Mendele,” the Yiddish e-mail club. Within a few years I had progressed to translating Yiddish short stories for publication.

And in 2004, when I learned about an intensive Yiddish summer program being offered in Vilnius, I decided to enroll.

I had to consult an atlas to find out where I was headed. There it was: Lithuania. One of the three Baltic republics, with Latvia and Estonia to the north and Poland to the south. Geographically the size of Maine. Population three-and-a-half million, about the same as Connecticut. “Drink bottled water,” said the brochure from the travel agency; “please avoid shorts.”

In my childhood, the Old Country had seemed utterly inaccessible, as if it existed in another dimension, like Atlantis or Narnia. No one from my family who’d made it across the Atlantic Ocean had ever gone back. Yet now I was on my way, preparing to look up into the same sky that had sheltered my great-grandmother Asne and her dairy farm, my great-grandfather Dovid-Mikhl and his study house. Under this sky, my grandfather Yankl (later Jack)

had been a *yeshive bokher* (a religious student) and a socialist before fleeing to America to escape the Czarist draft. Here, my great-uncle Will had been imprisoned behind barbed wire in a ghetto during the Nazi era. And here, another great-uncle, Aaron, after surviving the concentration camp at Dachau, had been arrested by the Soviet regime and exiled to Siberia.

Of all of them, only Uncle Will was still alive. Shortly before setting off for the Old World, I paid a visit to him and his wife, my Aunt Manya, at their New York apartment. The two of them were waiting in their doorway as I stepped off the elevator. With his small, trim stature, his silver hair and twinkly eyes, Uncle Will closely resembled my grandfather. His high cheekbones were the same as my grandfather's, my mother's, my own. Aunt Manya, even tinier than my uncle, stood beside him with her proud, perfect posture.

With great ceremony I spread out the two maps I'd downloaded off the Internet. The first showed the streets of Rokiskis, the town in the very northeast corner of Lithuania where my family tree extended back into the early 1800's. Uncle Will had lived here until he was 13 years old. The Lithuanians pronounced it *ROCK-ish-kiss*, my uncle said; the Jews called it Rakishok. The second showed the city of Siauliai (*show-LAY* to the Lithuanians, Shavl to the Jews), 130 miles northwest of Vilnius. Here, Will and his mother and other family members had been confined in the ghetto during the war.

Where should I go? I asked. Where did you live?

My uncle was almost ninety years old. Some 60 years had passed since he'd left Lithuania in a boxcar in 1944. The world of his youth was nearly beyond reach.

"You had to cross the road to get to school," he said slowly. "You took a right turn out of the square."

His hand hovered over the little grid. Finally he pressed his finger down. "Here," he said. "We lived here." He sat back in his chair and smiled, then reached under the table and took a nip from the bottle of vodka next to his foot.

Then something unexpected happened. My uncle felt in his pocket and pulled out a worn photocopied page. He unfolded it and put it in my hand. "Read this," he said.

When I did, I learned something about my uncle and his wartime actions that I had never known before. Something that had been hidden from me. Something I had never suspected.

Growing up, I'd heard heroic stories about Uncle Will during the Holocaust. In the ghetto, he'd saved two little girls by hiding them in a cupboard. On the death march out of Dachau, he had carried Uncle Aaron when he was too weak to walk. I treasured these stories. But now, as I headed for the scene of the great tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he'd decided it was time to reveal something else.

By the time I left my aunt and uncle's apartment later that afternoon, the view of the past that I'd grown up with had broken apart, and the course of my journey to Lithuania had been radically altered.

Soon after the encounter with my uncle came another surprise. I'd written to an official in Rokiskis to ask about the museum there. She wrote back encouraging me to visit. The old manor house boasted a magnificent collection of goblets and golden plates, she said. And there was something else. Something important. An old man in town named Steponas wanted to talk to a Jew before he died. Would I be that Jew?

Would I? As I read and reread the official's words, I tried to imagine myself face-to-face with this man, this Steponas. Here was another old man who wanted to talk to me about his role in Lithuania's Holocaust. What had he done, and what did he want from me?

It took me a long time to write back. If not for what I'd just heard from Uncle Will, I might have said no. I might have turned away. But now the ground was shifting. Old certainties were dissolving, new complexities emerging. Something was expected of me. I wrote to the Rokiskis official. Yes, I said, I would meet with Steponas.

A desire to strengthen my ties with my origins had drawn me to the Old World. Now I felt my mission expanding. The old man in Rokiskis, I quickly learned, was only one of many people in the land of my ancestors who were seeking to engage with a complex past. With the fall of the Soviet Union, a newly independent Lithuania had gained the right – indeed, the responsibility – to shape its own historical understandings. A new public discourse about the Holocaust had begun. As the country prepared to join NATO and the European Union, Lithuanians – some of them, at least, both non-Jews and people in the 4,500-member Jewish community – were holding up long-buried truths for examination. They were questioning cherished assumptions and challenging age-old prejudices. Only in so doing, they felt, could Lithuania hope to build its future.

The way forward was not easy. The murder of the Jews of Lithuania had been among the most brutal in all of Europe. The German invaders had issued the orders, but in most cases Lithuanians pulled the triggers. In the forests surrounding Lithuania's towns and villages lay hundreds of mass graves where Jews had been shot and hastily buried. In the three major Lithuanian cities, including my uncle's Siauliai, tens of thousands of Jews had been confined in ghettos; most were eventually killed. By the end of the war, out of an estimated prewar Jewish population of an estimated 240,000, fewer than 10% remained alive.

Nor did the end of World War II bring peace to Lithuania. The incorporation of the Baltics into the Soviet Union brought an economic and social upheaval, a guerrilla resistance struggle, and tens of thousands of deportations to Siberia. Between 1940 and 1952, historians say, as much as one-third of the Lithuanian population was lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions, and immigration.

By 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, half a century under two regimes had turned Lithuania into a cauldron seething with competing martyrdoms, hatreds, and resentments.

Nonetheless, a brave cadre of leaders had begun to extend hands across cultures, reach out across radically disparate views of history, search for ways across seemingly unbridgeable divides. They followed in the footsteps of people in many other countries – Germany, Poland, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, and Haiti among them – who had launched concerted public initiatives in the wake of conflict. Their aim was to extend the bounds of empathy, to bind up wounds, and even, perhaps, to prevent future genocides.

The more I learned about the Lithuanian endeavor, the more it intrigued me. If the effort was fragile, struggling to take root in less-than-hospitable soil, that vulnerability only increased my interest. Maybe what was happening in the land of my ancestors could help me make sense of my Uncle Will's disclosure and of whatever it was that Steponas, the old man in Rokiskis, wanted to tell me. Maybe, I thought with increasing excitement, my stay in this country would turn out to be not only a journey of return but an encounter with the future. Maybe a homeland could be a place to stretch myself, to grow.

As I immersed myself in Yiddish and walked through the streets that once pulsed with Jewish life, I would connect deeply with my own heritage. But I would also look beyond that heritage, I decided. Drawing on my background as a journalist, I arranged to meet the people who were leading Lithuania's Holocaust education programs and other efforts to engage with the past in order to build a better future. I vowed to seek out the chafing of differing world views, the tectonic shifting of different histories. I would allow all the elements of my journey – my encounter with Yiddish, my questions about Uncle Will and Steponas, and Lithuania's collective engagement with its 20<sup>th</sup>-Century history – to collide.

All of this, I hoped, would help me answer a set of questions that had come to seem increasingly urgent. How do we judge the bystanders and the collaborators, the perpetrators and the rescuers – and ourselves? Where should my sympathies lie in this place where some had killed, some had resisted, and many had suffered? Could I honor my heritage without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of those who came before?

As societies around the globe struggle to recover from war-torn histories, the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust will not fade; in fact, they will always be with us. What I hoped to learn in the land of my ancestors would have relevance far beyond the borders of Lithuania. Observing how people in the land of my ancestors were seeking to open the minds and hearts of their fellow citizens might open my own mind, my own heart.

I tried to imagine how Uncle Will and Aunt Manya would respond upon hearing that I had set up appointments with Lithuanians who were working to exhume the past and that I had a hunch that Lithuania had something to teach about moving forward from tragedy.

They would be highly skeptical, I felt sure. Be careful whom you trust, they would warn, and whom you forgive. Lithuania's engagement with the past might be nothing more than a cynical ploy, a charade designed to impress the West. Keep an open mind, they might say, but don't let your brains fall out.

In the damp courtyard of Vilnius University, the heavy Baltic sky darkened and the rain fell harder. The white-haired woman in the flowered dress stepped away from the dais and the director of the Yiddish program, Mendy Cahan, took her place. Dressed in a white linen shirt and a black jacket with an antique cut, he looked as if he had stepped out of a bygone era as he combed his fingers through longish dark hair and then gripped the podium.

We were about to travel back in time, he said. “I invite you to taste the borscht, the herring and the latkes. Taste this long tradition.”

Guided by the last Yiddish speakers of the region, we would explore the streets of this beautiful city. We would plumb the riches of Yiddish poetry and prose. We would study the styles and structures of writing, meditation, and understanding that had flowered in this part of the world. “And we will touch on terrible destruction.”

Suddenly a great black cawing thundercloud of crows filled the heavens. All of us – students and white-haired Bluma and the Vilnius residents who had come to welcome us – peered up into the drizzle. Harsh cries echoed off the stone walls. The director, too, looked up. He waited until the birds were gone and the sky was blank.

“You must listen to the silences as well as to the sounds,” he said.