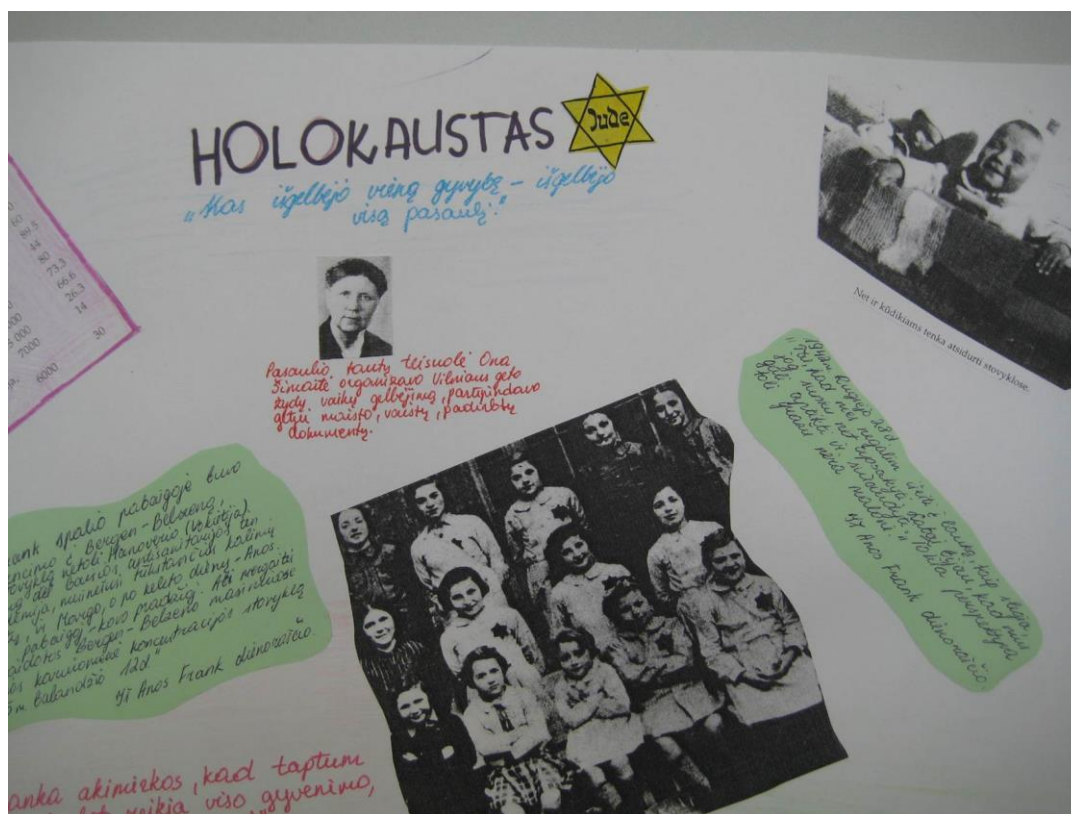


## A Lithuanian High School Covered with Butterflies By Ellen Cassidy

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Poster at high school in Kedainiai, Lithuania

Growing up during the Soviet era in Lithuania, Laima Ardaviciene does not remember being taught anything about the Holocaust at school. But those days of silence are over – for her and for the Atzalynas Gymnasium (high school) in Kedainiai, Lithuania, where she is a teacher.

During the past school year in this city of 30,000, located 32 miles north of Kaunas, school community, headed by principal Gintaras Petrusis, created a unique project that integrated Holocaust education into 12 subjects, involving 17 teachers and 658 students age 15-18.

Ardaviciene, who has taught in the school for 20 years, worked with her fellow teachers to incorporate Holocaust themes into the study of art, ethics, religion, Lithuanian, English, history, psychology, computer science, and even physics.

In art class, students participated in “The Butterfly Project” initiated by the Holocaust Museum in Houston, Texas. The museum collected 1.5 million handmade butterflies to represent the 1.5 million children who perished in the Holocaust.

The theme comes from a poignant poem written by a boy imprisoned in the Terezin concentration camp in 1942. "I never saw another butterfly," the boy wrote. "Butterflies don't live here in the ghetto."

The hallways of the school were soon covered with colorful images of butterflies, representing "the souls of murdered children, children's unfulfilled dreams, wishes, and desires," Ardaviciene said.

Posters made by the students adorned the walls of the school hallways, telling the story of the Holocaust in Lithuania, including the experiences of the Jewish victims, the facts of participation in the killing by some Lithuanians, and portraits of Lithuanians who helped to rescued Jews.

In physics class, students learned about Albert Einstein. In ethics class, they watched and discussed "Life Is Beautiful," a Holocaust movie. In religion class, they learned about Judaism. In Lithuanian class, they read "Stalemate," a novel about the Vilna Ghetto by Icchokas Meras. In English, they wrote essays based on the famous Einstein quotation, "The world is a dangerous place not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

In history class, students visited the notorious Ninth Fort near Kaunas and viewed "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas," a movie about a Nazi concentration camp. In computer science, they created a website (<http://atzalynasprojects.weebly.com>).

The project interested Ardaviciene from a pedagogical point of view. "I am interested in project-based learning," she said, "as a dynamic way to teach." But it was the importance of the subject itself that made the project especially meaningful to her and to others at the school.

In the words of Ignas Grinevicius, a recent graduate, "Those who participated actively in the project are now more conscious about the tragic events that took place during the Holocaust. The most important thing that students learn is empathizing with the Jewish nation of that time. This has a lasting impact."

Grinevicius added, "I personally believe that they are now ready to spread the message of empathy and non-cruelty in one or the other way - not even necessarily in the case of the Jewish nation. I believe it is a pretty universal skill. Learning the history of the Holocaust inevitably lives on in you."

Lina Blinstrubiene, a history teacher, agrees.

"We should not forget the historical events," she said, "which can sometimes be uncomfortable and painful. During such a project, students learn not only the history but learn to be tolerant and understanding."

The school worked with the multicultural center of the Kedainiai Regional Museum. The museum created an extensive exhibit, located in a former synagogue, which tells the story of the Holocaust in the city and commemorates the Jewish residents who perished.

Holocaust education is a part of the curriculum in Kedainiai schools beginning in fifth grade, said Blinstrubiene. Students learn about the Holocaust in Lithuania and in the context of world history, she said, as well as Jewish history, the Old Testament, Jewish customs and traditions.

In tenth grade, Blinstrubiene said, “we quite extensively discuss the Holocaust, the reasons, the consequences, and the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators.”

Other schools in Lithuania are also involved in projects about the Holocaust. Eighty-six Lithuanian high schools and museums are part of a network of official Tolerance Centers, under the auspices of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Regimes in Lithuania.

For the coming school year, the school community has planned a new project – this one about cultural diversity.

“Kedainiai was known as a multicultural town where Lithuanian, Jewish, Polish, Russian and Scottish residents lived,” Laima Ardaviciene said. “We are going to speak about different communities that lived in Kedainiai. The goal of the project will be to expand our awareness: All different - all equal.”

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press), which has been published in Lithuanian as *Mes esame cia* (Media Incognito Press). Visit [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).