



Holocaust Remembrance in Lithuania

By Ellen Cassedy

Amit Belaitė in independence march in Vilnius. Photo: courtesy of Amit Belaitė

This year we mark the 75th anniversary of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

German tanks rolled into Lithuania in June of 1941. Over the next months, across the country, the majority of Lithuania's Jews were massacred.

At times over the past 75 years, the reality of the Holocaust in Lithuania has been buried. At times it has been denied or distorted. Today, a variety of initiatives are enabling Lithuanians to face the history of the Holocaust, to engage with that history, and to seek to use an understanding of the past to build a more tolerant future.

For nearly seven centuries, Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania lived side by side mostly in peace.

Lithuanian cities were renowned as centers of Jewish culture and religious learning. On the eve of World War II, Lithuania's Jewish population totaled more than 220,000 out of 2.8 mil-

lion—about 7 percent. One-third of the occupants of Lithuanian cities and one-half of the residents of Lithuanian towns were Jewish.

But by the mid-20th century, friction between Jews and non-Jews was on the rise. Nazi propaganda flooded the region. The Soviet incursion of 1940 caused further divisions in Lithuanian society. So did the deportations (of both Jews and non-Jews) to Siberia in June of 1941.

In late June of 1941, the German army rolled in. And a land of relative harmony became a place of terrible brutality.

During the Nazi occupation, Lithuania's political and church leaders did not save the Jews. Some individual Lithuanians rescued Jews, at the risk of their own lives. Many did nothing. And some assisted with the killing. While it was German commanders who gave the orders, in most cases it was Lithuanians who pulled the triggers. In the cities, tens of thousands of Jews were

confined in ghettos. Most were eventually killed. By the end of the war, only 6 percent of Lithuania's Jews remained alive.

After the war, in Soviet Lithuania, mention of Jews all but disappeared. In the 1970s, when Jews were allowed to emigrate, most of Lithuania's Jews departed for Israel or the West, and Lithuania's Jewish heritage sank further from sight. Today, Lithuania's Jewish population is only about 4,000.

But as the Soviet Union began to collapse, Lithuanians had the opportunity, and indeed the responsibility, to shape their own narratives about the past. Truths that had been suppressed under the Soviet system began to be told.

The leaders of Sąjūdis, the Lithuanian independence movement, made clear that an important element in the building of a new nation was the re-incorporation of Jewish history into the national narrative. Bringing Lithuania's Jewish history out of the shadows, independence leaders believed, was essential. The story of the Holocaust would have to be told.

With the help of Britain's Holocaust Educational Trust, hundreds of mass murder sites were clearly marked. New monuments were erected.

In 1998, President Valdas Adamkus founded the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes. "It is not for the Jews that we are doing this," a Commission staffer said, "and not for international relations. This is for us. Our goal is to transform ourselves from a society of bystanders into an active civil society."

With its dual focus, on both the Soviet and the Nazi eras, the Commission has been wracked with controversy. For several years, the Holocaust division was shut down. Recently, however, the Commission was reconstituted, with a new proclamation emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The educational arm of the Commission has created more than 100 high school tolerance centers all over the country.

Since independence, enough time has elapsed for a new generation of Holocaust remembrance leaders to emerge.

Faina Kukliansky is the new head of the Jewish Community of Lithuania. She started a project called Bagel Shop, which is run by young non-Jewish Lithuanians, with the aim of attracting Lithuanians to learn about the nearly vanished Jewish heritage that was once interwoven into the fabric of Lithuanian life. Bagel Shop is located within the Jewish Community building. So once again, bagels are now being served in Vilna (Vilnius).

Another new effort is called Vardai (Names), a grassroots project led by young non-Jewish Lithuanians that has spread to towns and cities all across Lithuania. In each location, on September 23, the anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna



Photographs from ruins of Vilna ghetto, enlarged and placed in windows of former ghetto library in Old Town Vilnius. Photo: Ellen Cassidy

Ghetto, people are invited to come forward and take a turn reading out loud, one at a time, the names of the former Jewish residents of their city or town.

These are solemn and uniquely personal ceremonies. They last for hours. One by one, name by name, people step forward to say the names and professions of Jews who once called Lithuania home. As they do so, they feel both a presence and an



Plaque in Vilnius commemorating Vilna ghetto. Photo: John Armaugh

absence. They sense both the vibrant Jewish culture that once was, and with the gaping void left behind by the Holocaust.

One participant said: "This is our history, our memory. When one whispers the names and professions of the people who lived here, one can no longer forget."

Last fall, my own ancestral town of Rokiškis, where my Jewish forebears lived, installed signs in Yiddish and Lithuanian remembering the Jewish history of the town, including the massacre of the Jews in August of 1941.

A number of Lithuanian towns are doing the same—posting signs, erecting memorials and holding commemoration ceremonies.

There's no doubt that anti-Semitism is alive and well in Lithuania today. Despite the proliferation of Holocaust remembrance efforts, there are constant flashpoints and crises.

In 2012, there was controversy over the honoring of Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, a World War II-era Lithuanian leader who signed orders forcing Jews to move into the Kaunas ghetto in 1941. Another controversy flared when the government

announced plans to expand a sports stadium near Vilnius on the site of a historic Jewish cemetery.

Every spring, when Lithuania celebrates its independence, neo-Nazis are among those who parade through the streets of Vilnius and Kaunas. Recently, leaders of the Jewish community in Vilnius made a point of joining the march. Amit Belaitė, chair of the Lithuanian Union of Jewish Students, carried a handmade poster that said "I Love Lithuania," with a Star of David in the middle. "I wanted to send the message," she said, "that we Jews are part of a multicultural Lithuania and we are proud to be Litvaks"—the traditional term for Lithuanian Jews.

Another recent development in Lithuania's engagement with the Holocaust is the publication of a book called *Mūsiškiai* (Our People), by Rūta Vanagaitė, who was moved to write after discovering that her own grandfather had collaborated with Nazis. She researched archives and, alongside "Nazi-hunter" Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, travelled to killing sites across Lithuania to talk to living witnesses of the Holocaust.

"I tried to take a closer look at people who killed," Vanagaitė said, "to understand them, to see how they started, what motivated them.

"If, under particular circumstances, it happened once," she said, "can we be sure it won't happen again?" She went on, "We cannot close our eyes to truth, however painful and ugly it is. A mature nation must know its history so it is not repeated."

The book became an instant bestseller in Lithuania. Four printings sold out right away. The publication of the book prompted the Lithuanian government to promise to release a list of more than 2,000 names of Lithuanians who participated in the Holocaust.

The best of Lithuania's Holocaust remembrance efforts have several qualities in common:

- They pose questions, rather than supplying answers.
- They do not force people to repent or feel guilty. Instead they invite people to design their own vehicles of remorse;
- They celebrate the glories of the Jewish past along with mourning the tragedy.
- They call on people to join together. Lithuanians are called to step forward because their finest selves are appealed to and respected in the difficult dialogue that must take place. All hands are needed in the vitally important project of repair.

Lithuania has not finished coming to terms with its past, and in fact that past will never be finished—and should never be finished. Through a variety of Holocaust remembrance efforts, Lithuanians today are seeking to face the past and to use their understanding of history to build a better future—a future in which people can join together to resist the forces of hatred.

*Ellen Cassedy traces her Jewish ancestry to Rokiškis and Biržai in Lithuania. She is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, an account of how Lithuania is encountering its Jewish heritage. It is available in Lithuanian as *Mes esame čia*. For more information, visit www.ellencassedy.com*



Swastika in Jewish cemetery. Photo: Ellen Cassedy



Memorial at killing site in Rokiškis. Photo: Ellen Cassedy