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Across Divides: Ellen Cassedy and the Art of Cross-Cultural Communication

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Photo Credit: Yermiyahu Ahron Taub



Nearly as soon as her book *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (reviewed by Beth Dwoskin, *AJL Reviews*, May/June 2013) was published in March 2012, Ellen Cassedy found herself being asked about her next project. To her, this seemed strange. *We Are Here*, the product of nearly ten years of work, had just been born, she felt; its life was really just beginning. And this in fact has turned out to be the case. Without the aid of an agent, marketer, or publicist, Cassedy has been vigorously promoting her book and its message of cross-cultural understanding across the United States and abroad for nearly two years. While she once thought of her book as a kite that, once lifted, would stay airborne, she now sees it more like a beach ball that requires ongoing work to keep it aloft. Her promotion work serves as an illuminating model of how much an author can achieve through targeted market assessment, calibrated message delivery, and sheer perseverance.

Cassedy's book was born of twin impulses: to work with words and experience the joy of writing and to communicate to readers ideas of tolerance and understanding. She wanted to examine how a nation was coming to terms with and moving forward from a history of genocide. A central question undergirds Cassedy's project: How can we honor our dead without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past? Her exploration began in a personal vein regarding the Jewish side of her own family – those who perished and those who survived – and gradually expanded into an exploration of how Lithuania is (or is not) engaging its Jewish past. Throughout *We Are Here*, she elegantly interweaves her family story, the story of the Holocaust in Lithuania and its fraught contemporary legacy, and her own ongoing engagement with the Yiddish language, including her enrollment in a Yiddish summer program in Vilnius. The result is a work that's difficult to define: part memoir, part history, part travelogue, and yet consistently probing and compelling.

The range of perspectives and voices on such vivid display in her book are a product of Cassedy's considerable skills and experience as a writer and journalist. As a columnist for the *Philadelphia Daily News* in the 1980's, Cassedy wrote a column about work from the worker's point of view. Covering a variety of events in the city, her columns examined policy issues by foregrounding the perspectives of workers such as garbage collectors at the Italian Market, janitors, legal secretaries, nurses, among numerous others. In researching *We Are Here*, Cassedy deliberately sought points of view different from her own. Later, she was a speechwriter in the Clinton Administration.

Even before publication, she sought out opportunities to speak at a variety of venues, including libraries and synagogues such as the Wellfleet Library on Cape Cod, Mass. and the Anshe Chesed Fairmont Temple in Beachwood, Ohio. She wrote articles in such publications as *Bridges*, the *Forward*, *Hadassah*, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), and *Lilith*. Cassidy was never concerned about “giving too much away” before the book’s publication. Instead, she saw these efforts both as a sort of “book trailer,” a way to arouse interest, and also simply a way to communicate her ideas to others.

Cassedy has continued to make her ideas accessible in a variety of formats following the book’s publication, as well. She wrote articles on Lithuanian and Jewish websites, including ReformJudaism.org as recently as January 2014. She contributed op-eds to *Ha’aretz*, the *Jewish Journal* in Los Angeles, and *Washington Jewish Week*. As she stated, “You can’t wait for the media to come to you.” And she has arranged dozens of book talks, including one at the Association of Jewish Libraries conference in Pasadena, California, in June 2012. Other destinations included Ann Arbor, Boston, Chicago, Durham, N.C., London, Vancouver, B.C., Philadelphia, and New York City. Her book talks are lively presentations carefully tailored to each audience and include PowerPoint presentations with maps, photographs of key protagonists and sites in her book, and archival photographs. Libraries of all kinds, including public libraries, synagogue libraries, and university libraries have been the settings of many of her book talks, and librarians have provided invaluable support for her work. In fact, in one of her monthly columns on writing for the website SheWrites.com, Cassidy wrote that “libraries are a writer’s best resource,” providing opportunities for research, recharging, and speaking.

The translation of her book into Lithuanian provided an opportunity for Cassidy to return to Lithuania in February 2013, her first trip there since 2004. She spent three weeks in that country and visited numerous towns and cities, including Kaunas, Kedainiai, Panevėžys, Rokiškis, Siauliai, and Vilnius and speaking at numerous institutions, both specifically Jewish as well as general. For example, she spoke at the Vilnius Book Fair (attended annually by some sixty thousand people), the Vilnius Jewish Library, Jewish community centers, as well as schools throughout the country. Her trip was assisted by United States Embassy in Lithuania, with the support of Hannah Rosenthal, the former Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism.

Prior to her return to Lithuania, Cassidy wondered if the discussions on understanding that she had witnessed on her earlier visit would have continued. She discovered during her trip that, in fact, more work had been done. The project of facing the past had seeped down into levels previously unreached. She met schoolchildren who had learned about the Holocaust through the efforts of committed educators, and talked with Lithuanians about a number of commemorative efforts taking place in their country. To commemorate the September 23rd liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, young activists arranged for the reading of names of the liquidated at the Benedictine Church which had sheltered Jews.

Young tolerance leaders also visited the Lithuanian Parliament to distribute reproductions of yellow stars that Jews were compelled to wear in the Holocaust; they asked Members to wear them as a gesture of solidarity with those who perished. Many at the Parliament did wear the yellow star. Laima Ardaviciene, a teacher in Kedainiai, invited Cassidy to tour her high school, at which aspects of the Holocaust had been incorporated into virtually every subject of the curriculum, including English, Lithuanian, history, and even physics. The school corridors were lined with art work on the Holocaust. Another teacher who saw anti-Jewish graffiti in Panevėžys took it upon herself to open a tolerance center in the town. In Zagare, businessman Valdas Balciunas read a memoir by a Jewish descendant of the town and worked to establish a memorial plaque in the town’s square. He didn’t want his children to grow up in ignorance of history or learning outright distortions or lies, he said.

In her discussion at schools Cassidy talked with students about their country’s history and familial experiences and posed challenging questions about their present and future. Will Lithuania’s long history of relatively harmonious multi-cultural co-existence be the norm? Or will neo-Nazis gain the upper hand? She reminded students that the answer depends on them, as democracy requires each citizen to claim responsibility to engage vigorously in the public sphere. As with her book itself and her discussions with adults, her goal in speaking with young people is always to raise questions, rather than provide readily packaged answers. Cassidy recalled that many students possess some basic English skills and that she spoke with them in simple language, often accompanied by

visual gestures. Her talks, therefore, both in their content and in their modes of transmission, were themselves exercises in cross-cultural communication.

Cassedy is well aware of the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Lithuania and across Europe perpetrated in a variety of ways. She respects the work of those who devote themselves to calling attention to lingering hatred and acts of intolerance. She feels that her own mission is to shine the spotlight on those who, in an often hostile atmosphere and at considerable risk, take steps to face their country's Jewish past. The efforts of these individuals fuel her.

Cassedy's efforts have not gone unrewarded. *We Are Here* was awarded the Grub Street National Book Prize for Nonfiction, a Prakhin International Literary Foundation Award, the Towson Prize for Literature, and a Silver Medal in History for a Book of the Year Award from ForeWord Reviews. She has also been inspired by comments from readers and audience members at her talks and by continuing to learn about the Holocaust remembrance efforts of others. While some writers find the work of promotion to be taxing and are eager to return to their writing desks, Cassedy greatly enjoys connecting with readers and staying in touch with educators in Lithuania. These multiple strands of connection are at the heart of *We Are Here* and extend its life in rich and unexpected ways beyond the page itself.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub is the author of four books of poetry, including *Prayers of a Heretic/Tfiles fun an apikoyres* (Plain View Press, 2013). Please visit his website at www.yataub.net.