

Facing History in Lithuania

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?

by ELLEN CASSEDY

On a hot August afternoon in Vilnius, Lithuania, a dozen young people carrying brooms and flashlights made their way into a derelict building on narrow, curving Zemaitijos Street. They wore blue jeans and face masks to protect against the

dust and cobwebs. In the semi-darkness, they set to work clearing out broken furniture, trash and debris.

During World War II, the building in the heart of the old Jewish quarter served as the Vilna ghetto library. It contained 45,000 volumes, and every day hundreds of imprisoned readers lined up to borrow them. Meanwhile, in the basement, members of the ghetto resistance gathered in a soundproof room to practice shooting off contraband weapons.

The young people cleaning up the site

were members of a group called Vardai (Names), which aims to commemorate Lithuania's Holocaust victims and "to help revive our collective memory."

After the war, during the Soviet era, the books were put into storage and a music school took over the building. After that, squatters moved in. Now the building has been turned over to the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, and members of Vardai have big dreams for its future. Once refurbished — they hope — it will become a place where Lithuanians can engage with their nation's Jewish history. In their view, as this young country seeks to make its way as a European democracy, a serious encounter with the Jewish past — and with the painful truths of the Holocaust — is essential.

For nearly seven centuries, Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania lived side



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by side in relative peace. Pogroms were rare. The city of Vilnius (Vilna in Yiddish) became known as the “Jerusalem of the North.” The city of Kaunas (Kovno), too, grew as a center of Jewish culture. By the 20th century, about one-third of the occupants of Lithuania’s cities and about one-half of the residents of its towns were Jewish.

Despite all the years of multicultural tolerance, during World War II the annihilation of the Jews of Lithuania was swift and thorough. The country’s political and religious leaders either cooperated with the Nazi regime or at the very least failed to oppose it ef-

fectively. As for ordinary people, some defied Nazi orders by helping their Jewish neighbors, but most did not. Some played an active role in the killing of the Jews. By the end of the war, only six percent of Lithuania’s 240,000 Jews remained alive.

During the nearly half-century of Soviet rule, most expressions of Jewish culture were banned, and the reality of the massacre of the Jews went underground. Lithuania’s post-war generation grew up largely ignorant of their country’s magnificent Jewish heritage

and of the facts about its destruction.

But 25 years ago, when the Soviet Union was beginning to collapse, things started to change. Buried truths were unearthed. Denial began to give way to recognition. In the words of one leader of the effort to face the past, there came “an awakening from...a long slumber of mind, spirit and conscience.”

Fania Brantsovskaja, 92, is a survivor of the Vilnius Ghetto.



Opposite page: Volunteers cleaned up the derelict Vilna Ghetto library this past August. Above: Posters discovered in the ruins of the Vilna Ghetto near the library are now displayed on its exterior walls. Photos by Ellen Cassedy.

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and reflection can Lithuania hope to move forward
from a history of genocide.

Hundreds of mass murder sites were clearly marked. New monuments made clear that the Jews had been killed by “Hitlerists and their local helpers.” Plaques commemorating events in Jewish history were installed on city streets. Jewish cemeteries were restored. A Jewish museum and a Jewish secondary school opened in Vilnius. Here and there, synagogues began to hold services. And numerous educational efforts brought Lithuanians face to face with the suppressed history of a nearly vanished culture.

Today, Lithuania continues its encounter with the Jewish past. As many European countries are experiencing a resurgence of expressions of anti-Semitism, Lithuania, too, has seen an uptick in some worrisome indications of intolerance. The number of neo-Nazi participating in annual independence day marches, though small, is growing. Hate speech flares on the Internet and swastikas sometimes desecrate Jewish historical sites. And while the Lithuanian government recently allocated \$50 million in restitution funds to the Jewish community, the government is also regularly criticized for insensitive actions and inactions.

Still, an increasing number of officials, educators, artists and activists in this small Baltic land are devoting themselves to Jewish remembrance. Jews and non-Jews alike, they are seeking and finding ways to remember, to honor, to celebrate, to mourn, to ask tough moral questions. Only in so doing, they believe, will their country mature into an active civil society — a place where people choose to stand up and speak up, a place that values diversity, a place of tolerance.

Cleaning up the old ghetto library is one way Lithuanians are connecting with the Jewish past. Another is to join a

network of 96 tolerance centers located in high schools and community centers.

Ingrida Vilkiene, a former teacher, coordinates the network, which is part of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Soviet and Nazi Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, established in 1998 by President Valdas Adamkus.

Vilkiene takes groups of Lithuanian teachers on educational tours of Israel and also of the old Jewish quarter in Vilnius, where their guide is Fania Brantsovskaja, 92, a ghetto survivor and former anti-Nazi partisan. Brantsovskaja now works as the librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University. She weaves in the story of her own family history as she points out traces of the vibrant prewar Jewish community. Before the war, she said, all the Jews of Vilnius spoke Yiddish, and Jewish theaters, newspapers, schools, publishing houses and libraries were thriving. Today, only 2,000 Jews live in Vilnius and another 2,000 elsewhere in Lithuania.

As word spreads from teacher to teacher, the number of participants in the tolerance network is increasing. Though pleased with the steady growth, Vilkiene feels it's not enough.

“It's no secret that some of our teachers are anti-Semitic,” she noted. “They know nothing about Jews and they don't want to know. I've met people who say, ‘It's not our history. It's not my problem.’” Vilkiene disagrees strongly. “In fact, it *is* our problem. It's our histo-



Above: Irena Veisaite (now 86) with her mother in Kovno. Left: her rescuers, the Ladigiene family.



ry.” With the annihilation of the Jewish community, “all of us in Lithuania lost *our* people, *our* local citizens.” Reclaiming the Jewish past,

Vilkiene asserts, “is not only for the Jews, but for all of us.”

History teachers in Lithuania are required to teach about the Holocaust in grades 5, 6, 9, 10 and 12, but teachers have leeway to decide for themselves how they teach about the subject and for how long. “There should be a national curriculum that requires more,” Vilkiene said.

A few years ago, when she led a workshop in the western part of the country, “I was shocked to meet old-fashioned history teachers,” she recalled. “More than half were anti-Semitic. They were very aggressive. But a few years later, I got an e-mail from these same teachers. They wanted another seminar. They wanted to know more.” Vilkiene is hopeful that these teachers, with their evolving views, are evidence of a positive trend. “Maybe things are changing,” she said.

Complicating the effort to face the Jewish past is Lithuania's complex 20th-century history. In the year before the Nazi occupation and again after the war, Soviet authorities deported thousands of Lithuanians to Siberia. At the end of the war, when the three Baltic nations were incorporated into the Soviet Union, a bloody resis-

tance struggle raged for seven years.

Between 1940 and 1952, historians say, hundreds of thousands of people — Jews and non-Jews — were lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions and emigration. This massive disruption of society inflicted deep social scars. Today, some Lithuanians who seek to tell the once buried truths of the Soviet era are hostile to the project of facing the truths of the Nazi era.



Daiva Cepauskaite is the first Lithuanian to write a play about the Holocaust.

Critics of the International Commission worry that lumping the Nazi and Soviet eras together under one roof implies a false parity between the two eras, as if the suffering of Lithuanians under the Soviets was fully equivalent to the suffering of Jews under the Nazis. In response, others say that to shape their future, Lithuanians need to examine what happened in both eras. And unless people feel that their own grievances are being heard, they can find it difficult to attend to the grievances of others.

Bringing non-Jewish suffering to the table, it is hoped, will help to open minds and hearts. It will help people say not “yes, and” instead of “yes, but.” Yes, *you* have grievances, *you* were wronged. And *I* have grievances, *I* suffered. And that, it is hoped, can create a compassionate, open frame of mind rather than a closed, competitive frame of mind.

It’s a difficult balance. For several years, the Holocaust half of the Commission was shut down due to a conflict over actions by the Lithuanian prosecutor’s office. Recently, an agreement was reached. The Commission was reconstituted, and the proclamation reopen-

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ing the Commission explicitly emphasized the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

Schoolchildren and their teachers are also encouraged to engage with the Jewish past at the multiple branches of the Jewish Museum. Jewish artifacts that were saved all through the Soviet years, hidden away in back rooms by Lithuanian curators, are proudly on display.

Here, too, an exhibit called “Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells About the Shoah” presents the stories of some 50 children who survived with the help of their Lithuanian neighbors. Large black-and-white photographs bring visitors face to face with the rescued children and their rescuers. (The entire exhibit is available online at www.rescuedchild.lt.)

Survivors now scattered around the world helped to create the exhibit, explained curator Danute Selcinskaya. “The idea is that through personal stories, people will understand much better.”

Selcinskaya, who is not Jewish, has worked at the museum for 10 years. At first she was hesitant. “I thought it would be too difficult to work here,” she said. “But I felt a moral obligation. This is the medicine for the unhealing wounds of the Holocaust. These stories show that people had a choice.”

Rescuers smuggled Jewish children out of ghettos, pulled them out of death marches, concealed them in barns and forest hiding places and passed them around from home to home in secret networks. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Israel, has honored 844 Lithuanians who risked their lives to save Jews from annihilation.

Irena Veisaite, 86, is among the rescued Jews featured in the exhibit.

As a teenager, she spent more than two years in the Kovno ghetto, then escaped with the help of Lithuanians and moved into the home of a woman she came to consider her “second mother.” “To kill thousands of people,” Veisaite observed, “you need only several people with guns, and these people don’t risk anything except their souls. But to save one person, you need the tremendous courage of many people.”

The museum does not sugarcoat the reality that the rescuers made up only a tiny part of the Lithuanian population. The exhibit “is not only about saving,” Selcinskaya explained. “In every panel, we tell about the family before the war and about the deaths of other members of the family of the rescued child. We talk about the killers and about the many Lithuanians who participated in the civil administration of the Nazi regime. The stories we tell are as complex as the reality.”

Her goal, Selcinskaya explained, “is to emphasize that this topic is not an external topic. These were our neighbors. This was us.” And she is not waiting for the public to come to

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Dainius Diksaitis monitors the Internet for anti-Semitic content.



Fania Kukliankisy, chair of the Jewish Community of Lithuania.

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her. With funding from the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, she has launched a mobile exhibit that travels to towns and villages throughout the country. Slowly but surely, Selcinskaya said, the museum's work is having an impact. "This history is just now beginning to become part of our collective memory."

Is Selcinskaya correct that the reality of the Holocaust is starting to make its way into mainstream consciousness in Lithuania? A groundbreaking new novel and an equally groundbreaking new play suggest that she may indeed be right.

"Darkness & Company," by the popular author Sigitas Parulskis, is the first Lithuanian novel about the Holocaust. It is the story of a young Lithuanian man who descends into madness after becoming involved in the massacre of the Jews.

Writing about the Holocaust was a significant departure from past work by Parulskis, who was born in 1965, and very difficult, he said. For his readers, too, the work was deeply challenging — he received angry comments on the Internet. "A deep sense of shame is holding Lithuanians back from talking about the Holocaust," Parulskis said, "but only talking about it will help us address the shame and move forward."

Daiva Cepauskaite's "Day and Night" is the first play about the Holocaust by a Lithuanian. Growing up, recalls Cepauskaite, 47, she heard little about the Holocaust. When she began researching the subject, at first "I couldn't even imagine how to tell about it. It seemed impossible. It crosses the limits of your imagination."

Reactions to the play run the gamut. Cepauskaite received extensive praise and a Person of Tolerance Award — and plenty of negative responses. "Some people say I'm a traitor to the country," she noted. She does not agree. In fact, she said, "this play made me a patriot of my country. For me, being a patriot means you accept all pages of your country's history, including the dark pages. If we don't embrace this, history may repeat itself."

The play weaves together two parallel plots to emphasize that Holocaust history continues to reverberate in

present day Lithuania. "This is a story not only about the past, but also about today," Cepauskaite said. "Lithuanians have to mature, to look at this period as other societies have done."

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?

Faina Kukliansky, the chair of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, takes a nuanced view of anti-Semitism in Lithuania today. "Things are getting better," she pointed out. "That's for sure. No one officially would speak out against Jews." But "how much the officials are doing and how much their words are implemented is another question."

Kukliansky has launched a project called "Bagel Shop," staffed by young non-Jews, including Dainius Diksaitis, 28, a former student leader. He monitors the Internet for expressions of anti-Semitism and works to attract non-Jews to Jewish community events. "We do see stereotypes of Jews," Diksaitis said, "but not particularly negative ones. Jews are seen as rich, magically wise, great salespeople who can make money out of nothing, intelligent and well-connected around the world."

Lithuania has not finished coming to terms with its past, and, in fact, that process may never be finished. Activists, officials, educators and artists recognize that only through continuing remembrance and reflection can Lithuania hope to move forward from a history of genocide. As they seek to move their country toward tolerance, they employ a multipronged approach:

Rather than simply condemning the genocide, they *celebrate* the glories of the Jewish past. They encourage their fellow citizens to treasure what was lost. Rather than compelling, they *invite* people to feel their way into the dark past. Rather than supplying answers, they *pose questions*. They present the facts, then call on Lithuanians to take matters into their own hearts and design their own vehicles of remorse. They ask people to *join together*, because all hands are needed in the vital project of repair.

A few weeks after cleaning up the old ghetto library, the Vardai group

planned its first event inside the building. The walls were hung with enlargements of family photos found in the ruins of the ghetto after the war. In commemoration of the anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto on September 23, 1943, they invited members of the public to attend a poetry reading.

The poem "Green Aquarium" by Avrom Sutzkever set the tone for the gathering. Sutzkever (1913-2010) survived the ghetto and went on to become the acclaimed postwar Yiddish poet described by *The New York Times* as "the greatest poet of the Holocaust." His "Green Aquarium" is a series of prose poems in which the poet peers into the past as if through glass, offering glimpses of the ghetto in its last throes. "I look in: people are swimming here like fish. Numberless phosphorescent faces.... they are all swimming in the green aquarium, in a kind of silky, airy music" (new English translation this year, 2014, by Zackary Sholem Berger).

"Green Aquarium" had just been published in a Lithuanian translation by Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, the director of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute. Kvietkauskas was part of the cleanup crew in August, and he joined the group of distinguished tolerance leaders who lined up to read the poems aloud.

With barely enough light to see by, the readers took turns reciting the poet's words.

Among the readers was Irena Veisaitė, the Holocaust survivor whose story appears in the rescued child exhibit at the Jewish Museum. The effort to examine the truths of the past in Lithuania, she believes, "is not a Jewish project. It is a question for all of us in common. It is very important equally for Jews and for other 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."

Ellen Cassedy is the author of We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust (2012), which interweaves the story of her journey to the land of her Jewish forebears with an account of how Lithuania is encountering the Jewish past. She lives in Maryland and can be reached at www.ellencassedy.com.