I Am Here!

A Jewish woman's journey to Lithuania gives her a new perspective on the Holocaust and today's world. "I wanted to judge, once and for all," the writer explains. "But my visit to the Old World changed me."

by ELLEN CASSEDY

I set out for the Old World in an effort to connect with my own family past. But my journey into the old Jewish heartland expanded far beyond my family story. I ended up exploring how a country scarred by genocide is engaging with the past. And that exploration changed me.

My grandfather, Yankl Levin, came to America from Lithuania in 1911, escaping the Czarist draft. This is my Jewish grandfather on my mother's side. (The other side has to do with England, Germany and Ireland, which is where the name Cassedy comes from.)

When my mother was alive, I could count on her to keep track of my grandfather and all those who had come before. But after she died, I felt my family past threatening to disappear.

My mother had used Yiddish only sparingly, like a spice, but when she died, I found myself missing it. And when I learned of a summer institute for studying Yiddish in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, I was eager to go. I wanted to walk the streets where my forebears had walked, to breathe that air.

At that point I barely knew where Lithuania was. I had to get out an atlas to learn that it is the most southern of the three Baltic republics, with Latvia and Estonia on top. It's half the size of New York State, and the population — 3.5 million, of whom just 4,000 are Jews — is tiny.

One thing I did know was that Lithuania had a notorious Holocaust history.

Like many Americans in the generations after World War II, I was brought up with the commandment "Never Forget!" As a child, I was encouraged to think of myself as a kind of memorial candle whose job was to carry forward the memory of pain, death and injustice. Inside me was an unexamined antipathy toward the people of Eastern Europe, an us-versus-them, black-and-white construct that had been passed along from my grandfather, to my mother, to me.

Above: Ellen Cassedy. Below: A street in Rokiskis, where the author's family history goes back to the mid-1800s.

Ellen Cassedy

I knew that in 1941, when the German army invaded, the Jews of Lithuania were massacred with a swiftness and thoroughness that was unusual even for that time. I knew that it was the German invaders who issued the orders, but in most cases it was Lithuanians who pulled the triggers. I knew that nearly every Lithuanian town has its pit in the forest, not far from the market square, where Jews were assembled, shot and hastily buried in mass graves. In

the Lithuanian 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 240,000 Jews remained alive.

One of them was my Uncle Will.

Before leaving for the Yiddish program in Vilnius, I went to New York to see Uncle Will, and I brought some street maps I'd downloaded from the Internet.

My uncle was 87 years old. Sixty years had passed since he left Europe. But he could still put his finger on exactly where he'd lived and where he went to school.

Then, however, my uncle did something that profoundly changed my journey to Lithuania. He took me aside and told me that while he was confined in the ghetto in the Lithuanian city of Siauliai (Shavl in Yiddish), he'd been a member of the Jewish ghetto police.

I'd known my uncle all my life. All my life, I'd treasured heroic images of him in the Holocaust. I knew he'd saved two little girls during a roundup. I knew he'd saved my Uncle Aaron's life on the death march out of Dachau.

But this, being a member of the Jewish ghetto police, I'd never heard.

I knew that in ghettos all across Europe, Nazi authorities had required the Jews to create an internal police force with the job of carrying out Nazi orders. In some Lithuanian ghettos, the Jewish police had lined up people to be marched to the killing fields. But the Jewish police also helped people by subverting Nazi orders and helping them to escape. The Jewish ghetto police were controversial among the inhabitants of the ghettos back then, and they have remained controversial ever since. Primo Levi, the eloquent survivor of Auschwitz, called them inhabitants of a "gray zone" where good and evil blur.

As Uncle Will revealed this new information from his past, the picture of the Holocaust that I'd grown up with began to break apart. I could feel myself becoming agitated, ashamed. What had Uncle Will done in the ghetto? And what was I to do with this disturbing disclosure? Should I defend my uncle? Condemn him? Forgive him?

Courtesy, Ellen Cassedy

Above: A map of the vanished Jewish world recently drawn by a Lithuanian schoolchild. Right: The author's grandfather, Yankl Levin (left), and a friend in Lithuania at the turn of the 20th century.

Then another bombshell fell. I'd written to Rokiskis, the town where my ancestors had lived for generations, and now I heard back from an official there. She wrote that there was an old gentile man in town — I'll call him Steponas — who wanted to talk to me.

In 1941, as a boy of 17, Steponas had watched as the Jews of Rokiskis were assembled in a field and driven into the forest to be shot. That knowledge had tormented him all his life. Now he wanted to tell what he knew. He wanted to speak to a Jew before he died. Would I be that Jew?

I have to say that I was not inclined to feel warmly toward this man — this "bystander." And if not for what I'd just heard from Uncle Will, I might have turned away. But now the ground had shifted, so I agreed. Yes, I would be that Jew.

And so I went to Lithuania, the land of my ancestors, a complicated place, where Jews and their culture had once flourished, only to be annihilated on a massive scale.

In the mornings at the Yiddish institute, we studied Yiddish language and literature in all its glory, which was a mekhaye, a great pleasure. We began at the beginning, with the alphabet, just like in the old days, when little Jewish boys used to start their lessons at the age of three. On their first day, the letters in their primers would be sprinkled with sugar, to show that learning was sweet.

In the afternoons, the last Yiddish speakers of Vilna, now in their 80s, walked us through the streets of this beautiful city, the former "Jerusalem of the North," the capital of Yiddishland. They led us through the twisting lanes of the Jewish quarter that once swirled with political and intellectual ferment, synagogues, libraries, newspapers.

All that ended with World War II. In 1940, the Red Army marched into Lithuania. One year later, German tanks rolled in. A place where different cultures had coexisted relatively peaceably for generations became a place of horrendous and unprecedented violence.

Nor did the end of the war bring peace to Lithuania. As the three Baltic nations were incorporated into the Soviet Union, it was not an easy transition. A bloody resistance struggle went on for seven years. Tens of thousands were arrested and deported 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 emigration.

And by the time the Soviet Union fell in 1991, and Lithuania became a new independent nation, half a century under two regimes had created a cauldron, boiling and bubbling with competing martyrdoms, hatreds and resentments.

Because I'd been shaken by my Uncle Will's story, and because of the old man waiting to speak to me in

Rokiskis, I undertook to investigate that cauldron. What I found surprised me.

On the one hand, as expected, I found evidence of anti-Semitism. I saw swastikas painted on Jewish gravestones. Recently, in Lithuania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, a call has arisen for greater recognition of Stalin's crimes — a call that often seems bound up with an attempt to deny, diminish or distort Hitler's crimes.

Yet I also learned that when anti-Semitic incidents occur, some in Lithuania, Jews and non-Jews, speak up to condemn them. I met brave souls, Jews and non-Jews, who were striving in an often hostile environment to build a more tolerant future by bringing the Holocaust out into the open. These people educated and inspired me.

Perhaps the most remarkable of them was Irena Veisaite.

Some 70 years ago, at the age of 15, Irena went into the Kovno ghetto alone, without parents. After more than two years, non-Jewish Lithuanians managed to smuggle her out. She ended up hiding in the home of a woman she came to consider her second mother. This is how she survived. But after the war, this second mother was sent to Siberia by the Soviet regime.

Irena's whole family was killed by the Nazis, and then her second mother was taken from her. Yet out of this terrible suffering, she emerged as a leader of efforts to pursue mutual understanding. She defines tolerance as "a permissive or liberal attitude toward beliefs or practices different from or conflicting with one's own." But she adds another concept to that definition: "the non-acceptance of intolerance."

As I stepped through new doorways in Lithuania, Irena was my guide.

I visited an organization called the House of Memory, which helps schoolchildren to talk with their elderly family members about the lost Jewish world. As that world becomes vivid and personal, both generations begin to question and to change.

I met with two educators — gentile women — who were employed by the Lithuanian government to design curricula about the Holocaust for Lithuanians of all ages. They believed passionately that if Lithuania was to mature as a nation, Lithuanians needed to ask themselves rigorous moral questions about the Holocaust.

Ruta Puisyte, a young gentile woman working at the Jewish museum, showed me the text of the booklet she was writing. Here are the questions she was posing:

What do you think of Albert Einstein's saying, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing"?

Have you ever been in a situation where someone needed your help and you didn't provide it? If so, why did you behave like others, rather than following your conscience?

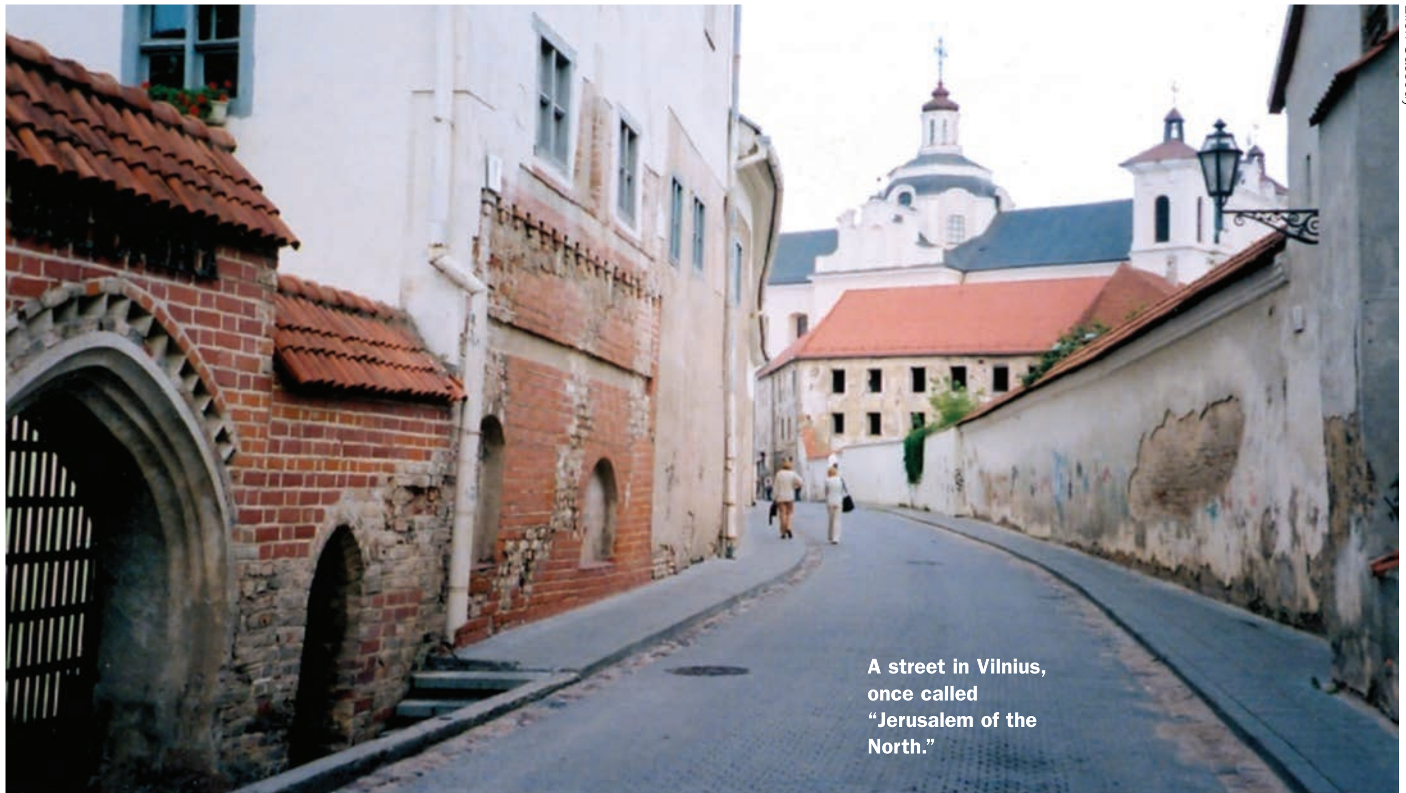
Is there a connection between your answers and the behavior of people during the war?

Finally, my guide and I drove to the very northeast corner of Lithuania, to Rokiskis, where my family tree extends back into the mid-1800s.

There I breathed in the summer light of the vast Baltic sky. I saw the ochre-colored wooden houses, the marigolds spilling over into the yards, and the road that is still called Synagogue Street, where my great-grandfather used to pore over the Talmud.

We pulled up in front of a cottage with a steep tin roof. Steponas, the old man who wanted to speak to a Jew, came out. He was bent and gnarled, his face deeply lined and weathered.

He didn't look at me. He got in



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A street in Vilnius, once called "Jerusalem of the North."

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front with the driver, his wife in back with my guide and me.

He asked the driver to drive slowly through the town.

Here, to the right of this flower bed, he said, was the camp. "The Jews were driven here. They were told that if they did not give up their valuables, they would be drowned in the pond. After they gave up their valuables, they were driven over this bridge, into this field. All of these houses and barns were full of Jews.

"I drove my wagon loaded with carrots past the camp. I threw carrots over the fence. The guards threatened to kill me."

The Jews were driven down the road, he recalled. "The White Armband police [Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis] lined both sides of the road. The White Armbands came from the villages and small towns all over this region. You needed a lot of people to guard such a huge crowd of Jews. Thousands of Jews."

Steponas began to weep. They took all the people, marching, he told me. "Even children and old people. It was all on my eyes. I was watching."

We got out of the car. I went into his cottage, saw the wood stove going up to the ceiling and the plaster walls painted bright green. I touched the battered pots, the cucumbers on the table.

Finally we did look at each other. He tapped his chest and looked into my eyes. "It was terrible," he said.

And I nodded and shook his hand.

I went to Lithuania wanting to learn Yiddish, to imagine myself back into the lives of my forebears, and to make up my mind about my uncle, the Jewish policeman, and Steponas, the bystander. I wanted to judge, once and for all.

But my visit to the Old World changed me.

When I met Steponas, and other Lithuanians who were engaging with their country's Jewish past, I lost the urge to sift and to sort, to make neat columns.

In listening to this sobbing man who wanted to talk to a Jew not to ask for absolution but simply to be bear witness, I came to appreciate that it can be hard to judge, hard to condemn, especially when we ask ourselves how we might behave under similar conditions of terror.

Steponas was not only a bystander. At times, he did more than simply watch. By throwing carrots over the fence into the ghetto, he risked his own safety, his own life. And the experience of watching while others were assembled to be murdered had inflicted a deep wound.

Uncle Will, the policeman, was clearly a victim, but also, if not a collaborator, at least a kind of bystander. With his policeman's armband, he "stood by," at the ghetto gate, feeling powerless to resist, while children and old people were loaded into trucks and driven away into the unknown.

As Primo Levi says of the Jewish prisoners who became part of the death machine at Auschwitz, "I ask that we meditate on [their] story...with pity and rigor, but that judgment of them be suspended." The guilt, he tells us, lies in the system itself. As for the guilt of such individuals, this "is always difficult to evaluate.... I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment."

During the most terrible times in the mid-20th century, solidarity was often difficult if not impossible. And for those people who personally lived through those times, it may be difficult or impossible — or even inappropriate — to move on beyond hatred. But for myself, and for others in the successor generations, I came to see a different role — an opportunity.

As I meditated on the stories of the two old men, my Uncle Will and Steponas, I felt myself questioning the black-and-white categories I had grown up with, expanding my sympathies beyond the boundaries I had been taught as a child.

In Lithuania, I came to understand that in this moral terrain, the journey itself matters very much. The serious attention we pay: This matters. I will never stop wondering about Uncle Will's actions in the ghetto. I will never stop pondering Steponas's role in the genocide that killed my people. And I will never stop asking of myself and others:

Can we honor our heritage and carry forward the memory of the Holocaust without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past?

What can we do to help create the kind of society where it is easier to stand up than to stand by?

To ask, without expecting ever to be done with the asking — that is the work of a lifetime. The attempt we make to listen and to comprehend: This, I came to feel, is where the hope for the future lies, for Lithuania, for Eastern Europe, for other countries struggling to emerge from conflict, for all of us.

At the close of the program at the Yiddish institute, two tiny women, former ghetto inmates, led us in singing the Partisan Hymn composed in the Vilna ghetto. The song's refrain, "mir zaynen do!" (we are here!) always used to strike me as sad, even pathetic. So many of those who had sung that song in the ghetto had died, and so few had survived — "we are *not* here" would be more accurate.

But as I stood up to sing, the song sounded different to me. Because spinning through my head were the faces of people I'd met in Lithuania, brave people, flawed people, Jews and non-Jews searching for a way forward out of the past. Now, to me, the song seemed to ask all of us to connect ourselves to one another — and to appeal to one another as fellow beings with the capacity for moral choice.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust *(2012), which tells the story of her journey to the land of her Jewish forebears. Cassedy's articles and English-Yiddish translations have appeared in a number of Jewish publications. She lives in Maryland and can be reached at www.ellencassedy.com.*