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We Are All Here: Facing History in Lithuania

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# WE ARE ALL HERE: Facing History in Lithuania

Ellen Cassedy

*A tfile iz yeder shteyn, a nigun yede vant...  
Each stone is a prayer; a hymn every wall...*

MOYSHE KULBAK, in the poem "Vilna"

Vilna: before the war, the narrow lanes of this age-old city pulsed with a vibrant Jewish life. Vilna was the Jerusalem of the North, the capital of Yiddishland. It was that bygone

world I was after when I enrolled in a summer program in Yiddish in the city now known as Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.

I roomed in a flat that was located within

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**ABSTRACT:** *The author of this essay reports on Holocaust education initiatives in present-day Lithuania. She interviews Lithuanian officials, teachers, and activists who are engaging with the Jewish past in an effort to build tolerance, understand the role of bystanders, honor "righteous gentiles," and foster reconciliation. The essay includes interviews with Irena Veisaite of the Open Society Fund-Lithuania and the House of Memory; Ruta Puisyte and Viktorija Sakaite of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum; staff of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes (an organization founded by Lithuania's President Valdas Adamkus); and information about the Tuskulenai "Park of Quiet" in Vilnius. The author also describes her experience as a student at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.*

the boundaries of the old Vilna ghetto and filled my eyes with the elegant balconies and the gently curving streets, and over it all, the long summer light of the Baltic sky. In class, the instructors guided us students through the grammatical thickets and the precious texts of *mame-loshn*, our mother tongue. The last Yiddish speakers of Lithuania—with their memories full of joy and sorrow—came to lead us through the city, pointing out the sites of schools, theaters, and synagogues that flourished here before the destruction.

On weekends, I traveled to the countryside. I visited the village of Vilkoliai, where my great-grandmother Asne had raised nine children while simultaneously supervising the production of milk, butter, and cheese on a dairy farm. In the town of Rokiskis, I located the street where my great-grandfather Dovid-Mikhl had spent his days bent over holy books in a wooden studyhouse. It was from this town that my grandfather Jacob had run away to America in 1911 to escape the Czarist draft. I went, too, to the site of the ghetto in Siauliai (the Jews called it Shavl), where my great-uncle Will had survived the Holocaust.

As I pursued the sounds and textures of the nearly vanished world of my ancestors, I learned that Lithuania as a nation was engaged in a journey into the past. And when I sought out the leaders of this Lithuanian effort to unearth the truths of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, I learned that the land of my ancestors had something to teach about binding up the wounds of the past and moving forward.

Jews arrived in Lithuania in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. On the brink of World War II, Jews made up one-third of Lithuania's urban population and about half of the residents of every town. During the war, with a swiftness and thoroughness notorious even for that terrible time, more than 90% of Lithuania's

240,000 Jews were killed. While it was usually the German occupiers who issued the orders, in most cases Lithuanians themselves pulled the trigger. Nearly every town has its pit in the forest, not far from the market square, where Jews were assembled, shot, and hastily buried in mass graves.

Nor did the war's end bring peace to Lithuania. In 1940, Soviet troops had moved into the country, and now, with Germany's defeat, Lithuania became a part of the USSR. The transition was marked by economic upheaval and a fierce guerrilla struggle. Tens of thousands of Lithuanians were exiled to Siberia. The deportees included Nazi sympathizers who had participated in killing Jews during the war, as well as a wide range of opponents of the Soviet government, including some Jews. Historians say that between 1940 and 1952, up to one-third of the Lithuanian population was lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions, and immigration. The country's Jewish community now numbers only 4,500.

Immediately after the war, the incoming Soviet government commemorated the murdered Jews with numerous rituals. Monuments were built at the massacre sites, and a Jewish museum was established in Vilnius. But it was not long before Soviet policy changed course. Stalin's campaign against "cosmopolitans" (*i.e.*, Jews) began, and official mention of Jews all but disappeared. The plaques at the mass murder sites were altered so that they no longer referred to the Jewish dead, but instead to "victims of fascism" or "innocent Soviet citizens." The museum closed down. The reality of the Holocaust went underground.

In 1991, Lithuania became independent of the Soviet Union, and a new public discourse began—not only about the Soviet times but also about the Nazi era and the role that Lithu-



anians played in the Holocaust. That discourse is still going on, as a small but influential cadre of officials, teachers, and activists—Jews and non-Jews alike—ventures into the hidden recesses of the past, reaches out across seemingly unbridgeable divides, and searches for a way beyond disparate heritages and mutual prejudices. Their work can offer guidance to those of us in the second and third generations—those who did not personally experience the cataclysms of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century—who seek to define our role in remembrance, repair, and the prevention of future genocides.

Irena Veisaite, 78, is a survivor of Lithuania's Kovno ghetto who helped to found the Open Society Fund-Lithuania in 1990. The organization's aim is to foster democracy in the former Soviet republic; she was its chair from 1993 to 2000.

The Lithuanian effort to examine the truths of the past, Veisaite told me, "is not a Jewish project. It is a question for all of us in common. Of course it has not been an easy process, but it is very important equally for Jews and for Lithuanians." She went on: "We are trying to create a civil society, and in this effort it is crucial for Lithuania to understand what happened here. Because as long as you are hiding the truth, as long as you

fail to come to terms with your past, you can't build your future."

One of the first acts of the newly independent Lithuanian government was to rebuild the steps leading to the Palace of Trade Unions in downtown Vilnius. Just after the war, gravestones from the city's Jewish cemetery had been used to build these steps. The new government also replaced the plaques at the mass murder sites. The new plaques made clear that the victims were Jews, killed by "Hitlerists and their local helpers."

As Lithuania embarked on the effort to face its history, the war years began to be described in a way that made Lithuanian culpability impossible to ignore. Among the most influential voices was that of Saulius Suziedelis, a Lithuanian-American historian who published several groundbreaking essays, beginning on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1941 massacre. Suziedelis wrote:

The only way for Lithuanians to lighten the load of the difficult history of 1941 is to embrace it.... To admit that the country's moral and political leadership failed in 1941, and that thousands of Lithuanians participated in the Holocaust, is one of the preconditions for Lithuania's acceptance as a member of the trans-Atlantic community of nations.

Recognizing a historic burden is not the same as accepting collective guilt. No honest person argues that Lithuanians are a nation of criminals, or that today's Lithuanians are responsible for what happened in 1941 (any more than contemporary Americans are responsible for slavery). But the legacies of such crimes, the historical burdens, remain.

—from "The Burden of 1941," in *Lituanus*, Lithuanian quarterly journal of arts and sciences (Vol. 47, #4, Winter 2001)



In that spirit, in 1995, Algirdas Brazauskas, the president of the newly independent nation, appeared before the Knesset in Israel and delivered a formal apology for Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis.

Meanwhile, Veisaite and others initiated a variety of projects to promote tolerance, which Veisaite describes as “a permissive or liberal attitude toward beliefs or practices different from or conflicting with one’s own.” To that definition she hastens to append a codicil: “I would add the non-acceptance of intolerance.”

Veisaite helped to create an organization, the House of Memory, which designed a unique nationwide essay contest called “Jews: Neighbors of My Grandparents and Great-Grandparents,” encouraging schoolchildren to interview their elders about the past. (Several volumes of the winning entries have been published for a Lithuanian readership.) At Vilnius University she helped to found a Center for Stateless Cultures, of which the Yiddish

Institute became a part. And, she helped to initiate a traveling exhibit called “Jewish Life in Lithuania,” jointly sponsored by the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum (which had been reopened at the end of the 1980s) and the Lithuanian Institute of History.

Ruta Puisyte, a young gentile woman, spent two years bringing the 28 colorful panels of the “Jewish Life in Lithuania” exhibit to towns and villages throughout the country.

“It is like a festival,” Puisyte told me in her office at the Jewish museum. Her face glowed with enthusiasm. “We travel in a truck. As soon as we arrive in a town, we jump out and install the panels. We invite all the local officials to the opening, all the local organizations, and of course the Jewish community, if there is one.” Some local museums reported that the exhibit attracted more visitors than they normally drew in an entire year.

In every town, Puisyte said, a training session was offered to local teachers. Often, so

many signed up that some had to be turned away. "The word 'Holocaust' is new to many of them, or they do not know exactly what it means," Puisyte said. Age-old prejudices bubbled up as some teachers asked if it was true that matzoh was made with the blood of Christian children. "In nearly every session, I heard remarks such as 'Jews are communists' and 'Jews rule over the riches of the world.' But when teachers with these attitudes attend the seminars, they see that many of their colleagues have more open-minded points of view. I count this as a success."

Puisyte went on: "You never know with education. You plant seeds. You go and do it, you go and do it, and you believe." She showed me the text she was carefully crafting for an educational booklet that was to be distributed in Lithuanian high schools:

Most of the Lithuanian people didn't participate directly in the Holocaust. They saw the tragedy that the Jews were experiencing, felt sorry for them, but didn't aid them or attempt to save them. All they did was watch.

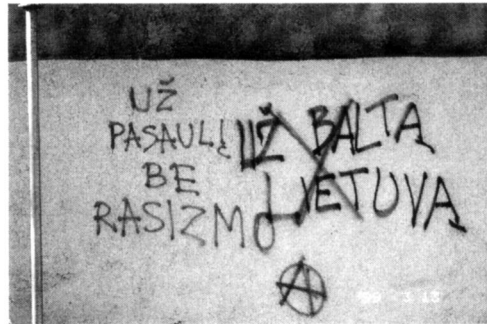
Four searing questions followed:

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"?

Why did only 6 percent of Lithuanian Jews survive? Could it have been different?

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?



Another leader in the effort to examine the past is the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes, which was established in 1998 by Lithuania's president, Valdas Adamkus.

"When Lithuania gained independence," said Snieguole Matoniene, a gentle woman who heads the Commission's education department, "Lithuanians were used to viewing themselves as victims." They knew all about how Soviet authorities had deported tens of thousands of Lithuanians to Siberia, but their understanding of the Holocaust was limited. "Most young Lithuanians had never seen a Jew. The notion that the Jews were the real victims seemed impossible." She continued: "We lived neighbor to neighbor for centuries, but even so, it is hard for Lithuanians to think of Jews as 'ours.' Jews were 'others.'"

In designing training programs for teachers and establishing "tolerance centers" in Lithuanian schools, the Commission draws on curricula from all over the world. Significantly, Matoniene said, "teachers are invited, not required, to teach about the Holocaust. It is important not to create a backlash."

In the town of Ukmerge, middle school students carried out a project called "Butterflies Don't Fly in the Ghetto," which described the concerts, drama performances, and other means of "spiritual resistance" created by Jews

in the ghettos. “The students in the audience were open-mouthed, silent. Everyone cried.”

The most sensitive topic, Matoniene said, is “the participation of Lithuanians in the killing of the Jews. It wasn’t just a handful.” Thousands participated directly in the massacres. “But it wasn’t everyone, either. Most Lithuanians were bystanders.”

“Should we judge the bystanders?” I asked.

Indre Makaraityte, a young gentile woman who works with Matoniene, answered. “We try to motivate the students,” she said, “to ask their grandparents, ‘What was your moral choice?’ We promote dialogue between the generations.”

“But should we judge?” I asked again.

“My mission,” Matoniene said, “is to ask this question, not to answer it.”



One chilly morning, I tromped onto the grounds of Tuskulenai, an old Vilnius estate where a controversial memorial was under construction. In 1994, some 700 bodies had been exhumed from beneath the green lawn of the estate. Forensic analysis of the remains showed that the victims had been executed and quietly buried by the KGB, the Soviet secret police, soon after the end of World War II.

In the newly independent republic, the hunger to honor the martyrs of the anti-Soviet resistance was enormous. Plans for a memorial got underway. But those plans were soon derailed when it emerged that many of the bodies were those of Lithuanians who had helped to massacre Jews in 1941.

The Jewish community lodged a protest against “the erection of a common memorial to those who are considered to be freedom fighters and those who, based on all moral norms, are war criminals and indictable offenders.”



Construction of the memorial came to a halt and a tumultuous debate began.

“The commission rethought the concept and refused to build the memorial,” said Diana Varnaite of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. “They talked with the Jewish community and decided it was necessary to change the idea. It was very hard to reach a final decision, because among the heroes of the nation lay the bodies of people who are absolutely opposite.”

When construction resumed, the new blueprint was not for a pantheon of heroes but for “a place of reflection,” Varnaite said. “The idea is for people to concentrate, to stay silent.”

The redesigned structure, a sunken circular room with a domed ceiling and walls lined with vaults, is called “The Park of Quiet.”

At the Jewish museum, I spoke with Viktorija Sakaite, a middle-aged gentile woman who directs the “Righteous Gentiles” project honoring Lithuanians who rescued Jews during the war. Sakaite began researching rescuers in 1992, in partnership with a Jewish professor. “We started with one box of memories and pictures,” she said. “We wrote hundreds of letters and began to gather oral histories.”



The research was not easy. Names and details had been lost. Many rescuers had died, and of those who were alive, many didn't want to talk. After the war, two-thirds of the rescuers had been sent to Siberia—not because they were rescuers *per se*, but because they were deemed “bourgeois.” (Rescuers *were* likely to have been better off than their neighbors, Sakaite explained, because people with extra resources could more easily afford to rescue.)

Despite the difficulties, over the years Sakaite's files grew to contain the names of some 3,000 Lithuanians who—in violation of strict Nazi orders, and unlike the vast majority of the population—had helped Jews in a variety of ways. Some safeguarded Jewish valuables and made them available at crucial moments when they could be used to pay for food or life-saving favors. Some hid and fed Jews in barns or specially constructed hiding

places, sometimes for long periods, sometimes at considerable expense. Some raised Jewish children who had been smuggled out of the ghettos. Some provided Jews with false documents that allowed them to pass as gentiles. Some saved Jewish books from the Nazi fires.

Sakaite has published three volumes of reminiscences and photographs, called *Hands Bringing Life and Bread*. Her goal is to complete ten or eleven volumes. By telling the stories of those who took extraordinary action, she seeks to enshrine that action and hold it up for emulation.



Kas, jei ne tu, kurs rytojaus Lietuva?  
*Who, if not you, will determine the future of  
Lithuania?*

– Vilnius billboard

Lithuania's initiatives to engage with the Jewish past have several attributes in common:

1. They celebrate, rather than simply condemn.

Lithuania's educational projects seek to connect people not only with the tragedy of destruction but with the glory of the Jewish past. Rather than simply having their noses rubbed in the bad deeds of the war years, Lithuanians are invited to treasure what was lost.

2. They invite, rather than require.

Leaders of these efforts believe that instead of being forced to accept responsibility for the events of the war years, Lithuanians should have an opportunity to take the matter into their hearts. People who design their own vehicles of remorse, they believe, are more likely to find their way to a moral view of the past and an open-minded vision of the future.

3. They question, rather than answer.

“Here are the facts,” these efforts say.



“Here are the questions. Now it’s your job, everyone’s job, to reflect on them.”

4. They call on people to join together.

“In a dialogue,” Irena Veisaite told me, “you need two parts.” Jews were not the only victims in the tumult of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuania. But acknowledging that gentile Lithuanians also suffered is not enough in itself. Lithuanians are called to participate in a moral exploration of the past not as victims and not only because they need to be taught a lesson—but instead because their finest selves are respected and their presence is actively desired.

Anti-Semitism is by no means absent in Lithuania today. Jewish cemeteries are desecrated and prejudice explodes on Internet sites. Yet these days, when such incidents occur, both Jews and non-Jews speak up to condemn them. That, said Irena Veisaite, “is a very big achievement.”

“Nurturing tolerance is a very slow process,” said Indre Makaraityte of the International Commission. For her, the effort is of the utmost importance. “It is not for the Jews that we are doing this, 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.”

At the end of my stay in Lithuania, two tiny women in their 80’s who were ghetto survivors and former partisans led the students of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in singing the Partisan Hymn, composed in the Vilna Ghetto in 1943. The song’s defiant refrain—“*Mir zaynen do!*” (“We are here!”)—had always struck me as sad, even pathetic. So few of the ghetto residents had survived. “We are *not* here” seemed more accurate.

Now, the song sounded different to me. As I stood up and joined in, the people I had met during my month in the Old World

crowded into my head: Irena Veisaite promoting her dream of dialogue. Ruta Puisyte traveling from village to village with her 28 colorful panels. Snieguole Matoniene and Indre Makaraityte seeking to build a new society by posing moral questions. Diana Varnaite treading a delicate line with her memorial that seeks to pay tribute to the fallen without enshrining evil deeds. Viktorija Sakaite creating her gallery of rescuers.

During the most terrible times in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuania, solidarity was often difficult if not impossible. But in Lithuania today, and elsewhere around the globe, the opportunity exists to expand our sympathies, to ask others to stand together with us, to appeal to one another not as victims, bystanders, or perpetrators, but as fellow beings with the capacity for moral choice.

Since my encounter with Lithuania past and present, the anthem of the Vilna ghetto sounds stirring and proud. Now, I hear a bid for all of us who will shape the future to connect ourselves to one another.

*Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn  
veg,  
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg,  
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho,  
S'vet a poyk ton undzer trot –  
Mir zaynen do!*

Never say that you are walking your last  
road,  
Though leaden skies may hide the blue of  
day.  
The hour that we long for will appear,  
The earth will thunder 'neath our  
footsteps:  
We are here!

*Mir zaynen do.*  
We are all here.

## LINKS:

The Vilnius Yiddish Institute runs a summer program at Vilnius University. <http://www.judaicvilnius.com>.

The Open Society Fund-Lithuania seeks to promote democracy. [www.osf.lt](http://www.osf.lt).

The House of Memory conducts an essay contest for schoolchildren about the Jewish past. Samples of winning entries (in English) appear at [www.atmnamai.lt](http://www.atmnamai.lt).

The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum houses the Gallery of the Righteous and the traveling exhibit about Jewish life. [www.jmuseum.lt](http://www.jmuseum.lt).

The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania can be reached at [www.komisija.lt](http://www.komisija.lt).

For more information about the Tuskulenai memorial, visit the website of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania: [www.genocid.lt](http://www.genocid.lt).

## PHOTOS:

p. 77 Stikliu Street in Vilnius. Photo by Ellen Cassedy

p. 79 Irena Veisaite, a founder of the Open Society Fund-Lithuania. The Lithuanian effort to examine the past "is not a Jewish project," she says. "It is a question for all of us in common." Photo by Ellen Cassedy

p. 80 Ruta Puisyte, curator of a traveling exhibit about Jewish life in Lithuania. "You never know with education," she says. "You plant seeds, you go and do it, and you believe." Photo by Ellen Cassedy

p. 81 Vilnius graffiti: "Up with white Lithuania" has been crossed out and replaced with a new message in blue: "Up with a world without racism." Photo by Ellen Cassedy

p. 82 Viktorija Sakaite directs the Gallery of the Righteous, honoring Lithuanians who rescued Jews during World War II, at the Jewish Museum in Vilnius. Photo by Ellen Cassedy

p. 83 Vilnius billboard: "Who, if not you, will determine the future of Lithuania?! Become socially active!" Photo by Ellen Cassedy