

HOLOCAUST STUDIES

Killed by their neighbors

It took more than six decades, but a unique collection of survivor testimonies about Lithuanian collaboration in the Holocaust is finally available to the public. Its blood-chilling accounts only make more disturbing another book, which seems dedicated to minimizing the collaboration and the ongoing denial of the phenomenon to this day

Expulsion and Extermination:

Holocaust Testimonials from Provincial Lithuania, by David Bankier. Yad Vashem, 232 pages, \$58

The Last Bright Days:

A Young Woman's Life in a Lithuanian Shtetl on the Eve of the Holocaust, edited by Frank Buonagurio Jewish Heritage and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 165 pages, \$39.95

We Are Here:

Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust, by Ellen Cassedy. University of Nebraska Press, 273 pages, \$19.95 (paperback)

By Efraim Zuroff

The Kuniuchowsky collection of testimonies of Holocaust survivors from the provincial towns and villages of Lithuania first came to my attention more than 30 years ago. At the time, I was working as a researcher in Israel for the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, looking for first-hand evidence of the mass murders that had been carried out in various locations in provincial Lithuania. Since there is relatively little information about, and few survivors from, these communities, this material was extremely valuable. Even more important, Leyb Kuniuchowsky, an Alytus-born engineer who had survived the Kovno Ghetto, had made a determined effort to record the names of all the numerous Lithuanians who had participated in the murders, making his collection a resource of potentially unique significance in the efforts to bring these Nazi war criminals to justice.

The problem was that for many years, Kuniuchowsky had refused to make it available to researchers, because he insisted on publishing the collection in its entirety, and no institution or organization was willing to do so. It was only in 1989, almost a decade after I began trying to obtain access to the testimonies, which had been recorded during the first three to four years after the end of the war, that Dov Levin of Jerusalem, the leading expert on the Holocaust in the Baltics, finally convinced Kuniuchowsky to donate his archives to Yad Vashem. And it is only now, another 20 years afterward, that parts of this unique resource have finally been published, edited by the late David Bankier, the former head of Yad Vashem's International Institute for Holocaust Research, with the assistance of Holocaust researcher Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky.

The inexcusable delay in bringing selected portions of these testimonies to the knowledge of the public was not without serious consequences, most notably in Lithuania, where the government has systematically tried to minimize or hide the unusually extensive participation of local Nazi collaborators in the annihilation of the country's Jews. More than 96 percent of them were killed in the Holocaust, with



almost all the murders carried out locally, in the vicinity of the Jews' residences, with the majority of the participants Lithuanians. This collection clearly unmasks distortions of the historical narrative of the Shoah by chronicling the numerically dominant role played by Lithuanians in the mass murders, many of which were carried out without any German or Austrian participation at all, and by naming and identifying almost 1,300 local perpetrators. In Bankier's words, the value of these testimonies is that "they identify those who humiliated, abused and tortured [the Jews], pillaged their belongings, ejected them from their homes and, in the end, massacred their families."

In order to maximize the value of the testimonies, the book begins with an introduction about Leyb Kuniuchowsky and his collection, and then provides a concise summary of the annals of provincial Lithuanian Jewry from the country's independence after World War I until the destruction of these communities during the Holocaust. It is followed by a more in-depth treatment of the various stages of persecution and murder of the provincial Jews, using excerpts from the testimonies to illustrate the trials and tribulations suffered by the Jewish inhabitants of the

more than 200 Lithuanian towns and villages that had Jewish communities. Starting with the initial days of the German occupation, the book recounts in vivid detail the imposition of forced labor, the plunder of Jewish property, the process of ghettoization and concentration, and ultimately the mass annihilation of Lithuania's Jews, with additional chapters devoted to the role of the local non-Jewish population, focusing on the local Nazi collaborators who did the actual killing.

In these chapters, the unique historical significance of these testimonies becomes readily apparent, as they provide critical dimensions in vivid detail of the tragic fate of approximately half of Lithuanian Jewry, elements that are missing from the pertinent official German and Lithuanian documentation. While the latter give us important information about the administrative implementation of the Final Solution, they hide or ignore highly significant aspects of the murders, which are critical to our ability to construct an accurate narrative of the Holocaust in Lithuania, where the proportion of Jewish citizens killed among communities that had more than 1,000 Jews was the highest in Europe.

In this regard, the most pertinent of the themes that emerge from the witness testimonies is, first and foremost, the extent to which it was primarily Lithuanian volunteers who carried out the murders. In every single provincial Jewish community, local collaborators were at least the majority, if not the only ones, doing the killing. Thus, for example, in places like Lazdijai, Telsiai, Eisiskes, Joniskis, Dubingiai, Babtai, Varena and Vandziogala, there were no Germans present at all, and in Onuskis, Vilkaviskis and Virbalis, the only Germans at the murder sites were photographing the crimes.

'Not worth a bullet'

A second theme that is evident in almost every testimony is the incredible cruelty displayed by the Lithuanian Nazi collaborators. In many cases, the preliminary stages of the Final Solution were accompanied by the brutal raping of Jewish women, including girls as young as 13 and 14 years old, and the public humiliation and torture of rabbis, as well as other Jews. It was also fairly common for Jewish infants to be murdered by having their heads smashed against stones or trees or being thrown



Photos by Beile Delechky from pre-war Kavarsk (clockwise from far left): Harvest time; the Jewish elementary school (*folks-shul*); unidentified woman and cows; Beile's best friend Yokeh, 1932.

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alive into mass graves, since "the little ones were not worth a bullet," as a Lithuanian "partisan" in Kudirkos-Naumiestis explained to an eyewitness.

A third theme is the nationalist context of the murders, which were viewed by many of the participants as acts of patriotism. Thus in Merkinė, for example, a witness described the celebration staged by the murderers: "Their faces glowing, they sang happily and loudly the Lithuanian national anthem and other nationalist songs." A similar scene took place in Zarasai, where a Polish witness related that the killers not only sang "Lithuanian national songs," but were very "happy and satisfied." These testimonies are reminiscent of the notorious murder of several dozen Jewish men in Lietukis Garage in Kaunas in late June of 1941, after which the large assembled crowd joined in sing-



intelligentsia, including doctors and teachers, to the most marginal groups. Thus in Dubingiai, it was a young priest named Zrinyas who led the partisans and organized the murders, and in Kuniuchowsky's own town, as he himself noted, "Lithuanians of every social group and class participated in arresting, tormenting, bullying, robbing and eventually shooting the Jews of Alytus and those of the surrounding townlets in Alytus county."

These elements complement the previously available documentation, which describes the murders from the perspective of the perpetrators and fails to fully acknowledge the extent of local complicity in, and responsibility for, the murders, as well as their more grotesquely cruel and bestial manifestations, all of which make the Kuniuchowsky collection a veritable treasure and indispensable resource for the study of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

Having said that, the book has several flaws and mistakes. The first flaw is that it lacks an appendix listing the names of the 1,284 perpetrators mentioned in the



Photographs by Beile Delechky, from "The Last Bright Days"

ing the Lithuanian national anthem. It was this ultra-nationalism which undoubtedly fueled many of the acts of extreme cruelty by Lithuanians toward their Jewish neighbors, whom many Lithuanians erroneously perceived as communists.

A fourth – and extremely important – theme is that all strata of Lithuanian society voluntarily participated in the persecution and murder of the Jews. This is a fact that has systematically been hidden or ignored in Lithuania, where local participation in Holocaust crimes is usually attributed solely or primarily to "hooligans" or criminal elements. The sad truth that emerges clearly from these testimonies, however, is that participation in the mass murder of the Jews encompassed all strata of Lithuanian society, from the clergy and

testimonies, along with identifying information arranged geographically. The second is that it does not present sufficient background on the witnesses and the circumstances of their survival. The third is that it does not address the question of violence by Lithuanians against Jews before the arrival of the German troops, a subject being fiercely debated in Lithuania today. While various local historians and government officials deny the phenomenon, there is clear evidence of physical attacks by Lithuanians on Jews in more than 40 cities, towns and villages during the initial days following the German invasion on June 22, 1941.

The two mistakes that mar an otherwise superb job are the assertion that each of the four Einsatzgruppe numbered 3,000

men, when that was the total manpower of all four of the units, and the fact that a typo in the book's final sentence makes its current formulation the exact antithesis of the entire message of the volume.

Life in the shtetl and today

Two other recent publications on Lithuanian Jewry deal with different time periods. "The Last Bright Days" is a beautifully produced album of photographs, mostly of Jewish life in the shtetl of Kovarsk, by town photographer Beile Delechky, who immigrated to America in late 1938. Some of the photographs are accompanied by Delechky's diary and notebook entries, which together provide a last, nostalgic look at a world about to be destroyed, but the volume offers little information on the fabric of Jewish life or any insights on the community's impending doom. In that respect, the book, whether intentionally or not, magnifies the pain and sense of tragic loss in the wake of the total destruction of Jewish Kovarsk and of provincial Lithuanian Jewry.

Ellen Cassedy's "We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust" actually attempts to deal with contemporary Lithuania. Ostensibly a reported account of the summer of 2004, which the author spent in Vilnius studying at the local Yiddish language institute, the book's real goal is to tackle the far thornier problem of Lithuanian-Jewish relations in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In Cassedy's words, she seeks to determine whether she could "honor my [Litvak] heritage without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of those who came before." Adding to the drama of her quest is the fact that just before going to Vilnius, she learned from her great-uncle that he served as a policeman in the Shavli Ghetto, a revelation that shattered her original view of his past and challenged her preconceived notions about the roles of Lithuanians and Jews in the events of 1941-1944.

Such a mission might have produced a very valuable book, had it been undertaken by a journalist much more knowledgeable about (or at least open to learning about) the extensive complicity of Lithuanians in Holocaust crimes, but Cassedy either came with her mind made up about the cardinal issues or was brainwashed by Lithuanian apologists during her summer in Vilnius. Such a book should also have taken into account the government's total failure to punish hereto unprosecuted local Nazi collaborators, as well as the systematic efforts of the current Lithuanian government to promote its theory of "double genocide," which posits the canard that the crimes of communism are equivalent to those of the Nazis.

Unfortunately, Cassedy's efforts were doomed to failure from the very beginning

because of her unbalanced approach to the topic and her determination to prove her hypothesis that the land of her ancestors is populated by an impressive number of people dedicated to commemorating and teaching the truth about the Holocaust, including the unpleasant parts about local complicity and cruelty, and to engaging in fruitful dialogue and building sturdy bridges of reconciliation and cooperation. Cassedy acts like an archer so intent on hitting the bull's-eye that she shoots her arrow first and only then draws the target around it.

One example of Cassedy's lack of objectivity can be seen in the differences between her almost heartless attitude toward her great-uncle and her compassion for a Lithuanian man who claims that his family helped Jews who did survive the war, although there is no evidence to support his story. In her distorted view of the Shoah, the Jewish policeman and the Lithuanian bystander are in the same category and should be judged as such. And then there are the numerous factual



errors, all of which help support her thesis, such as her claim that in the wake of the Wiesenthal Center's Operation Last Chance project, which in Lithuania aimed at maximizing that prosecution of local killers, the "Lithuanian prosecutors put about a dozen defendants on trial." In reality, not a single suspect whose name we submitted to the authorities was ever indicted, let alone brought to trial.

Reading the book, I kept asking myself how Cassedy would respond to the sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents, neo-Nazi marches and intensified promotion of the double genocide theory by the Lithuanian government in the years since her original visit to Vilnius. The answer came in an author's note at the end of the book, in which she acknowledged these facts but remained as blind as ever to their implications. In fact, she has allowed the current government, which has done more than any other country to promote the equivalency canard and to undermine the justified status of the Holocaust as a unique case of genocide, to promote her book. So of course it is hardly surprising that Cassedy's book, with its message of praise and adulation for a country still in deep denial of its bloody past, will soon be published in Lithuanian, whereas there are no such plans for the witness testimony recording the prominent role Lithuanians played in killing Jews that is presented in "Expulsion and Extermination."

Dr. Efraim Zuroff is the chief Nazi hunter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and director of its Israel office. His most recent book, "Operation Last Chance: One Man's Quest to Bring Nazi Criminals to Justice" (Palgrave/Macmillan) deals extensively with Lithuania's failure to prosecute local Nazi war criminals and honestly confront the widespread complicity of Lithuanians in Holocaust crimes.