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 Testimonies from Provincial Lithuania, by David Bankier. Yad Vashem, 232 pages, $58

The Last Bright Days:

We Are Here:
Memories of a Lithuanian Holocaust, by Ellen Cassidy. University of Nebraska Press, 273 pages. $19.95 (paperback)

By Efraim Zuroff

The Kunichowsky collection of testi monies from provincial Lithuania that 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, Kunichowsky had refused to make it available to researchers, because he insisted on publishing the collection in its entire ty, and no institution or organization was willing to do so. It was only in 1989, almost a decade after he had finally agreed to give access to the testimonies, which had been recorded during the first three years after the end of the war, that Dev Levin of Jerusalem, the leading expert on the Holocaust in the Baltics, finally convinced Kunichowsky 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-Tsion Kilbansky.

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 un masks distortions of the historical narrantive of the Shoah by chronicling the numer ically 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 per petrators. In Bankier’s words, the value of these testimonies is that “they identify those who humiliated, abused and tortured [the Jews], pillaged their belongings, eject ed 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 intro duction about Leib Kunichowsky 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 destruc tion 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 prov incial 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 occupa tion, 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 impartant information about the administrative implementation of the Final Solution, they hide or ignore highly significant aspects of the murders, which are critical to our abil ity to construct an accurate narrative of the Holocaust in Lithuania, where the propor tion 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 testim onies is, first and foremost, the extent to which it was primarily Lithuanian vol unteers 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 Lardijai, Telsiai, Eisiskes, Joniskis, Dubingiai, Babi tai, Varena and Vandzioga, there were no Germans present at all, and in Onuski, Vikaviškis 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 accom pa nied 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 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 con text of the murders, which were viewed by many of the participants as acts of patriotism. Thus in Merkine, 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 nationalistic 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 Lietuviu Garage in Kaunas in late June of 1941, after which the large assembled crowd joined in sing-
intelligentia, including doctors and teachers, to the most marginal groups. Thus in Dubingiai, it was a young priest named Zrinyi who led the partisans and organized the murders, and in Kunichowch’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 Kunichowsky 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 book, whether intention-ally 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 Savli 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 heretofore unprosecuted local Nazi collaborators, as well as the systematic efforts of the current Lithuanian government to promote its theory of “double genocide,” 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 grace and adulation for a country still in deep denial of its bloody past, will soon be published in Lithuania, 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.”

Learn HEBREW Online
For more info or to sign up visit: eTeacherHebrew.com/haaretz or call us: +1 646 200 5822

Dr. Eliram Zuriff is the chief Nazi hunter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and director of its Israel office. His most recent book is “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.

Photos by Beile Delecky, from “The Last Bright Days”

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 survived the war, although there is no evidence to support his story. In her “Detected Voice of the Shoah, the Jewish policeman and the Lithuanian bystander are in the same category and should be judged as if both possess the same category and should be judged as if both possess the numerous factual errors, all of which help support her thesis, such a dedication to commemorating 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 react 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 grace and adulation for a country still in deep denial of its bloody past, will soon be published in Lithuania, 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.”