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OPINION COMMENTARY

My Grandfather's Crimes Against Humanity

A family memoir gets surprising reactions from Lithuanians, Russians and Jews.

By Silvia Foti

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I grew up the proud granddaughter of a Lithuanian war hero who fought against communists. My grandfather, Jonas Noreika, has a school and streets named after him. When my mother, on her deathbed in 2000, asked me to write a story about her heroic father, I enthusiastically agreed.

Unfortunately, as I dug deeper, I discovered to my horror that my grandfather was also a Holocaust perpetrator involved in murdering at least 8,000 Jews. On my story's release, Russians wanted to use me, Lithuanians vilified me, and Jews embraced me.



Ms. Foti's grandfather Jonas Noreika.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SILVIA FOTI

My grandfather wrote an order on Aug. 22, 1941 to send thousands of Jews to a ghetto in Zagere, where they were slaughtered. My family story has brought this to the forefront, toppling Lithuania's image as an innocent bystander in the Holocaust.

As a result, Russian TV, radio, newspapers and even the press secretary from the Russian embassy in Washington begged me for interviews, promising an audience of millions. They gushed that my story was important because it overturns the heroic story of a Lithuanian partisan. I had to say no. The last thing any Lithuanian wants to hear is a lecture from the Russians on mistreating innocent people.

I became so paranoid about talking to Russians that I nearly missed a crucial interview with NBC News because its Lithuania-based stringer used a pseudonym that sounded Russian. I had deleted five or so emails from him out of fear. A mutual friend intervened to assure me the reporter worked for NBC.

While the Russians have been clamoring for me, Lithuanians have put me in a virtual blackout. They wish my story would go away. Lithuania's denial of its role in the Holocaust is so strong that some friends and family have called me a traitor. Lithuanians are traumatized by the unwelcome label of perpetrators.

Yet Jews are embracing me. They can't believe a Lithuanian has admitted the truth. It is almost unheard of that a family member would admit the crimes of her grandfather.

The story makes Lithuania look bad, but I believe it's best to look history in the eye to avoid repeating mistakes. When you put words to the seemingly inexplicable, the trauma loses some of its force. I've learned that national narratives are serious business. They build a country and instill cultural cohesion, and they will not be given up without protest.

Ms. Foti is author of "The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather Was a War Criminal."

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