No More Lies. My Grandfather Was a Nazi.

In Lithuania, he was celebrated as a hero. But we can't move on until we admit what he really did.

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By Silvia Foti
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When I was growing up in Chicago during the Cold War, my parents taught me to revere my Lithuanian heritage. We sang Lithuanian songs and recited Lithuanian poems; after Lithuanian school on Saturdays, I would eat Lithuanian-style potato pancakes.

My grandfather, Jonas Noreika, was a particularly important part of my family story: He was the mastermind of a 1945-1946 revolt against the Soviet Union, and was executed. A picture of him in his military uniform hung in our living room. Today, he is a hero not just in my family. He has streets, plaques and a school named after him. He was awarded the Cross of the Vytis, Lithuania's highest posthumous honor.

On her deathbed in 2000, my mother asked me to take over writing a book about her father. I eagerly agreed. But as I sifted through the material, I came across a document with his signature from 1941 and everything changed. The story of my grandfather was much darker than I had known.

I learned that the man I had believed was a savior who did all he could to rescue Jews during World War II had, in reality, ordered all Jews in his region of Lithuania to be rounded up and sent to a ghetto where they were beaten, starved, tortured, raped and then murdered. More than 95 percent of Lithuania's Jews died during World War II, many of them killed with the eager collaboration of their neighbors.

Suddenly, I no longer had any idea who my grandfather was, what Lithuania was, and how my own story fit in. How could I reconcile two realities? Was Jonas Noreika a monster who slaughtered thousands of Jews or a hero who fought to save his country from the Communists?

Those questions began a journey that led me to understand the power of the politics of memory and the importance of getting the recounting right, even at great personal cost. I concluded that my grandfather was a man of paradoxes, just as Lithuania — a country caught between the Nazi and Communist occupations during World War II, then trapped behind the Iron Curtain for the next 50 years — is full of contradictions.

In this way, perhaps, Lithuania is like many other countries that spent 50 years under Soviet occupation. During this time, there was a deep freeze on the truth: Lithuanians were only allowed to talk about how many *Soviet* citizens were killed during World War II. References to Jewish victims were scrubbed away by the occupiers. I would like to think that if Lithuania had been a free and independent nation after World War II, it might have acknowledged its own role in the Holocaust.

Correcting historical memory turned out to be dangerous. When I publicly questioned the official story of my grandfather's life, I was vilified by the Lithuanian community in Chicago and in Lithuania. I was called an agent of President Vladimir Putin of Russia. Lithuanian leaders still believe their country's identity depends on holding onto its heroes, even at the cost of the truth.

The twists and turns of Jonas Noreika's short life made it easier to hide the bad by accentuating the good. And yet there was so much bad.

In 1933, as a young soldier in the Lithuanian Army, he wrote "Raise Your Head Lithuanian," Lithuania's equivalent of "Mein Kampf," which incited hate toward Jews as a solution to Lithuania's problems. In June 1941, he led an uprising against the Soviets, even as he was collaborating with the Nazis. In July, he ordered the murder of all of the 2,000 Jews in Plunge, the town from which he led the uprising. In August, the Germans welcomed him as the new district chief of the Siauliai region, and the same month he signed orders to send thousands of Jews to their eventual deaths. Under his watch, roughly 8,000 Jews were killed.

In the version of history that is now celebrated by Lithuanians, my grandfather and others like him were forced to sign those documents by the Germans. But when I dug deeper, I learned that becoming district chief brought him the best house in the region, about 1,000 reichsmarks each month and a job for my grandmother. That sounded to me more like temptation than coercion.

He did stand up to the Nazis, not by saving Jews but by trying to stymie recruitment for the SS. In March 1943, he was sent to a Nazi concentration camp. He was released in January 1945, then conscripted by the Red Army. Later that year, he began organizing the revolt against the Soviets, who had turned from Lithuania's liberators to its occupiers. The Soviets captured him the next March. He was executed in February 1947 at the age of 36.

Transforming a Nazi collaborator into a national hero requires four steps of manipulation. One step shifts all the blame to the Nazis, even though my grandfather, like many Lithuanians, willingly participated in slaughtering Jews. The second step creates a victim narrative, asking how a Jew killer could be sent to a Nazi concentration camp. The third step discredits counternarratives by labeling them as Communist propaganda told by enemies of the state. The final step refuses to accept that two seemingly contradictory truths can coexist: Noreika bravely fought against the Communists *and* shamefully participated in killing Jews.

After researching his life for the past 20 years, I've dared to call my grandfather a Nazi even though he never officially joined the party. He worked with the Nazis, acted like them, was paid by them, hated Jews like them and, like them, facilitated torture and murder.

Did Lithuanian officials actively hide the truth because it would make the country look bad? Or were they in genuine denial in a democracy too fragile to face its own history? Unfortunately, this isn't just about my grandfather. He is a microcosm of the entire national story, and that national story echoes across Eastern Europe.

The passage of time has created the space to speak about the truth, but also increased the urgency of doing so before remaining memories fade and another generation passes. Analysis of a dark past is always traumatic. But we will never achieve clarity and healing if we base our history on lies. Although later generations might not know the details, they will still experience the emotional pain passed down from parent to child to grandchild.

I have made my peace with my grandfather. I have vowed to reveal his crimes by giving witness to the truth, and I have vowed to try to correct Lithuania's memory of the Holocaust, in part by asking for honors bestowed on him to be stripped. This can lead to reconciliation between Lithuanians and Jews as we remember what happened and learn from it to ensure it never happens again. Perhaps acknowledging this truth will allow Lithuanians to have a healthier national identity and a pride in our poetry, our language, our food — but not our dark past.

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