My Grandfather's Crimes Against Humanity

By Silvia Foti

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.

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.

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

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 martyr.

While the Russians have been clamoring for me, Lithuanians have put me in a virtual holding cell with my story. They wanted my story to 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."

Lithuania and the Holocaust: A Dark History

Rather than being reviled by Lithuanians as "a traitor" for exposing her grandfather's role in murdering Jews ("My Grandfather's Crimes Against Humanity," op-ed, Aug. 26), Silvia Foti merits praise for revealing the truth.

I am an American Jew of Lithuanian ancestry. Ms. Foti's grandfather's involvement in killing Jews is only the tip of the iceberg of Lithuanian complicity in carrying out the Holocaust. Collaborators from Lithuania were among Hitler's most loyal henchmen in annihilating Jews.

An estimated 96% of Lithuania's Jewish population—212,000 out of 220,000—were murdered, a higher proportion than in any other nation. Notably, many of them were killed by their Lithuanian neighbors rather than by German invaders. While Lithuanian accomplices lacked the authority to administer the mechanics of the Nazi mass-murder machine, they served as the domestic engine of extermination. In the assembly line of death, these local accomplices incited violence against Jews, captured the victims, marched the martyrs to jail, dug the pits in which the hunted were entombed and fired many of the bullets that killed them.

Commander Franz Stahlecker, the head of Nazi Einsatzgruppe A, wrote in an Aug. 3, 1941, report to his German superiors of how "easy [it was] to convince the Lithuanian circles of the need for self-purging actions to achieve a complete elimination of the Jews from public life. Spontaneous pogroms occurred in all towns."

Despite the mass murder of more than 200,000 Jews, not a single Lithuanian has, to my knowledge, served a proportionate sentence in a Lithuanian jail for the Holocaust-related killing of a Jew since Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990.

Lou Gerber
Falls Church, Va.