

## NEWS & POLITICS

# The Crime of Surviving

By arguing that Nazi and Soviet crimes are equal, Lithuania is airbrushing the Holocaust out of its history

BY DOVID KATZ

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Rachel Margolis may be the most tragic Holocaust survivor on the planet.

She has stiff competition, to be sure, but Margolis's recent experiences are almost too surreal and painful to be believed. After the war—during which her parents and brother were murdered—Margolis decided to rebuild her life in her native city of Vilna (now Vilnius), the capital of Lithuania. For more than 40 years, she taught biology at Vilnius University. After the Soviet Union collapsed and Lithuanian democracy permitted it, she helped found the city's only Holocaust museum and became one of its stalwart presences, returning to Lithuania to lecture each summer even after relocating to Israel in the mid-1990s.

Now, at 88, Margolis is being defamed as a war criminal. Her crime? Surviving the Vilna ghetto to join the anti-Nazi resistance in the forests of Lithuania.

Margolis is one of a group of elderly survivors who have become pawns in a sinister game of Holocaust obfuscation by local authorities in the Baltic states—which, though they are among the smallest nations in Europe, had the highest rates of Holocaust genocide in Europe. A more complex phenomenon than Holocaust denial, obfuscation does not deny a single Jewish death at the hands of the Nazis. Instead, it uses as a starting point the idea that the Nazi genocide was not a unique event but rather a reaction to Soviet “genocide” (and

antecedent to further Soviet genocide) in which the same elements of Lithuanian society that often sided with the Nazi invaders were persecuted and imprisoned by the Communist regime, whose officials included Jews. The “double genocide” movement has gained the support of government and political parties in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, which have invested substantial treasure to persuade the entire European Union to accept the equality of the Nazi Holocaust and Soviet crimes. Their biggest success has been the Prague Declaration, issued from a conference on “European Conscience and Communism” in June 2008, which demands that Europe “recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy”; that Communism be assessed “the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal”; that a single “day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes” be declared, thus effectively eliminating Holocaust Remembrance Day; and that European history textbooks be “overhauled” so that “children could learn and be warned about Communism and its crimes in the same way as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes.”

Signs of the movement’s success are visible throughout Lithuania. The Museum of Genocide Victims on Vilnius’s central boulevard mentions the word Holocaust only sparingly and glosses over events at a place called Ponar in Yiddish (now known as Paneriai), where 100,000 unarmed civilians, some 70,000 of them Jews, were murdered, mostly by local Lithuanian militia. Instead, Lithuania’s Holocaust museum is devoted entirely to Soviet crimes. At a recent exhibition on the Ukrainian famine, a huge poster featured a woman telling visitors: “In Auschwitz we were given some spinach and a little bread. War is terrible, but famine is even worse.”

Two years ago, on Lithuania’s independence day, neo-Nazis marched down the capital’s central boulevard chanting “Juden raus,” or “Jews out,” and brandishing a specially modified Lithuanian swastika. (It has since become illegal in Lithuania to display Nazi or Soviet symbols.) Only after heavy pressure from local embassies—including those of the United States and other Western powers—did the country’s leaders condemn the march, a week after it occurred. This year, on March 11, “Juden raus” was replaced by the slogan “*Lietuva Lietuviams*,” or Lithuania for Lithuanians, and it is not a fringe movement. The permit for

the march was issued to Kazimieras Uoka, a signatory on Lithuania's March 11, 1990, declaration of independence and a member of parliament from the country's ruling coalition, the right-wing Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrat Political Group. Top officials said not a word until the Norwegian ambassador, Steinar Gil, protested on March 19, noting that 50 members of the country's parliament had protested a gay-rights march but not one objected to the neo-Nazis. The country's prime minister, Andrius Kubilius, replied on March 23, saying, "There are skinheads and neo-Nazis in every country, and they sometimes take a walk or chant something."

Local authorities and government agencies have also instigated campaigns of slander and legal threats against elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors whose experiences fighting in the forests with Communist-backed partisans against the Nazis would appear to threaten the viability of the "double genocide" theory.

"The only good Jew for them," said Berl Glazer, 85, believed to be the only elderly Orthodox Jew left in Lithuania, "is a dead Jew."

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It took Shmuel Shragge, an 84-year-old former truck driver, three sentences to sum up the perversion of history that it has taken me—a Brooklyn-born professor who settled in Lithuania to set up the Yiddish-studies program at Vilnius University—close to a decade to understand.

Shragge and his wife, Basye, 81, a retired medical doctor, are among the last of the prewar tribe of *Litvaks*, the Jews of Lithuania, whose seven centuries of history include some of the greatest achievements of European Jewish culture. On a recent visit to their modest, immaculate Soviet-era apartment in Kaunas, once known as Kovno and now Lithuania's second-largest city, Shragge revealed what was for him one of the most horrific memories.

He stood up, walked across the room and picked off the top sheet of a stack of plain white paper. Before sitting back down, he abruptly tore the piece of paper in two and let the halves glide down to the floor. "That was one of the first atrocities I saw right at the beginning, before the Germans came, in the hours

and days after war broke out here on June 22, 1941,” he said. I looked up at him, confused.

“The Soviet army was fleeing the German bombardment,” he explained. “But it would be some days before the Germans arrived. They took a young Jewish girl on the street and sawed her in half, like that piece of paper, and left the two halves to rot in the middle of the street, near the center of the city.”

Who was “they,” I asked? “*They* are the local Lithuanian ‘freedom fighters’ who were wearing the white arm bands of the Lithuanian Activist Front, who got the Holocaust going here by starting to murder Jewish civilians throughout the country before the Germans even arrived. Today they are honored as ‘heroes against the Soviets’ as if the Soviets were running from them.”

But maybe these first Holocaust murders were directed against Jews who had been sympathetic to, or collaborators with, the Soviet occupiers who had taken over Lithuania a year before? “Oh no, those guys ran away together with the Soviet army,” he answered. “The massacres of Jews started with old rabbis and young women as the main targets.”

Today, Shragge said, relations with his Lithuanian neighbors are excellent, though he added that there is a lot of anti-Semitism in the country. I asked him who the anti-Semites are. “The big shots,” he said. “The government, editors, professors, television people. Instead of wanting to understand what actually happened and to teach it truthfully to young people today, they are obsessed with mixing everything up and claiming that Nazism and Communism were equal. But you only have to scratch them to hear that all Jews were Communists and got what they deserved, and that Communism was the real genocide here.”

Since independence, the Lithuanian government has avoided returning prewar communal property, making it arguably the only country in the European Union to fail to enact restitution to the Jewish community. However, egged on by Emanuelis Zingeris, an ambitious Jewish member of parliament and a member of the dominant right-wing party, the state has also been toying with ideas to develop the Vilna ghetto as a Jewish-themed tourist park. Supporters of the project call it “Fragments.” Opponents, principally in the Jewish

community, dub it the “Dead Jew Disneyland Park.” The state has also funded Jewish-themed statues, cultural events, and plaques designating historic buildings.

Lithuania’s contradictory “Jewish affairs policy”—which it shares with its Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, and with right-wing nationalist factions in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—originates in the desire to airbrush the Holocaust out of history. This wish is intimately intertwined with Eastern Europe’s special kind of anti-Semitism, which maintains a love for Israeli, American, and other Western Jews, as well as for the prewar Jewish heritage but loathes present-day Jewish communities. At the heart of that loathing is the sin of memory: Local Jews know that the few Jews who survived usually did so thanks to the Soviet Union, while local nationalists sided with Hitler and carried out much of the killing.

The presence of so few local Jews is, in part, what has made it so easy for the double genocide theory, and its corollary of Holocaust obfuscation, to take root. Ignored by both the Jewish and Western worlds—with the important exception of the Simon Wiesenthal Center—the double genocide movement has begun to spread to major international organizations. Last July, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued the Vilnius Declaration, which included a number of the most noxious elements from the Prague Declaration. The declaration takes the assumptions of the double genocide movement as a given by referring to “two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide.” Moreover, it calls explicitly for a combined “Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism,” which, observers point out, would inevitably replace Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Shamefully, the United States was among the nations that voted for ratification of this deliberate distortion of history, which is intended to whitewash the crimes of local right-wing elements in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust by eliminating the memory of the Holocaust itself. When I spoke to several visiting U.S. congressmen and senators during their visit to Vilnius for the conference, it was obvious that they did not have the vaguest idea about the implications of U.S. approval of the declaration. Among them were Senators George Voinovich and Benjamin Cardin, who had spoken out forcefully in support of the Jewish

position on restitution of communal property and against anti-Semitism. But the bigger issue, the revision of European history to delete the Holocaust, went unnoticed.

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Holocaust obfuscation is the perverted product of the attempt to encourage the states of the Baltics and Eastern Europe to confront the history of World War II—including local collaboration with the Nazis. In the late 1990s, as part of their European accession bids, Eastern European states found themselves pressured by NATO and the European Union to commemorate the Holocaust. In response, the three Baltic states each set up “red-brown commissions,” panels charged with studying both Soviet and Nazi crimes. The Lithuanian commission, with the Orwellian name the “International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania,” has the most notorious history of all. Housed in the prime minister’s office, the commission succeeded in attracting Israeli Holocaust scholar Yitzhak Arad, who is the founding director of Yad Vashem, a Holocaust survivor, and a hero of the anti-Nazi partisan resistance.

In joining the group, Arad was given assurances of academic independence. But in April 2006, the Lithuanian daily *Respublika* called Arad a war criminal for having fought with the anti-Nazi Soviets. Within months, the state’s prosecutors began an investigation into Arad. After an international outcry, part of the investigation was dropped in the fall of 2008. Prosecutors issued a statement calling on “the public” to provide more evidence, citing an anonymous “expert historian” who attacked a book Arad had published in 1979. Observers were puzzled. Arad quit the commission and is now listed on its website as having his “membership suspended.” In protest against the entire enterprise, another member of the commission, British historian Martin Gilbert, resigned.

But this turmoil at the commission was only the beginning. On May 5, 2008, following demands made earlier that year in the daily *Lietuvos Aidas*, state prosecutors sent armed police to look for two Jewish female Holocaust survivors, both veterans of the anti-Nazi partisan resistance. One, 87-year-old Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky, is a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

The other was Rachel Margolis. As a researcher at the local Holocaust museum, Margolis had made a sensational rediscovery of the diary of a Christian Pole named Kazimierz Sakowicz, who witnessed thousands of murders at Ponar. Sakowicz reported that the volunteer killers were mostly locals. For this discovery and the subsequent publication of the diary in 1999 (Yale University Press brought out an English edition in 2005), Margolis had become a target of hatred for those who adhere to the ideology of a “double genocide.”

Both women had been incarcerated in the Vilna ghetto, and both lost their parents and siblings in the Holocaust. Both escaped the ghetto on different dates in September 1943, and both joined Soviet-sponsored anti-Nazi partisans in the forest. It was this last fact that enabled prosecutors to allege in “pre-trial investigations” that the two women should be considered war criminals for having fought with the Soviets.

Like Arad, Brantsovsky and Margolis were investigated for war crimes without any charges or specific allegations, just innuendo based on published Holocaust memoirs. “At least the anti-Semites finally began to read our memoirs,” Margolis told me.

The defamation campaign against Lithuanian Holocaust survivors reached a peak at the end of May 2008, when prosecutors told the media that the two women could not be located. This gave rise to Internet posts claiming “the Jews hide their own criminals.” But Fania Brantsovsky works at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, a minute’s walk from the presidential palace, and Rachel Margolis is easily reachable in Rechovot. Both were found in minutes during the course of reporting this piece.

When confronted, chief prosecutor Rimvydas Valentukevicius, from the Division of Special Investigations at the Prosecutor General’s Office of Lithuania, told Swedish journalist Arne Bengtsson: “We are investigating criminal activities, which could be crimes against humanity. The information has to be checked. It is a normal procedure. I see nothing political in that. Why is there so much interest in them? Is it only because they are Jewish?” In reply to this oft-repeated prosecutorial rejoinder to press inquiries, Shimon Alperovich,

81, chairman of the Jewish community of Lithuania, wrote in a widely circulated public letter: “The prosecutors in Lithuania do not cease to persecute anti-Nazi Jewish partisans. The Prosecution Service’s claims that ‘hundreds of witnesses are being questioned’ are belied by the fact that only Jewish names are ever heard in the media: Yitzhak Arad, Fania Brantsovsky, Rachel Margolis, and others.”

Thankfully, there has been one fortunate wrinkle to this story. For those who believe in double genocide, it is important to have a paper trail of investigations into “Soviet Jewish partisans” to “equal” investigations into Nazi war criminals —and, in Lithuania, this effort has recently gone spectacularly wrong. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western embassies in Eastern Europe began to honor persons hounded by state prosecutors. The Irish ambassador, Donal Denham, boldly hosted a reception at his residence within weeks of police questioning Brantsovsky. Then-U.S. Ambassador John Cloud issued Brantsovsky a certificate of honor. The British and Norwegian ambassadors recruited Brantsovsky to lead walks through the former Vilna ghetto for the Lithuanian capital’s diplomatic corps. The president of Germany awarded Brantsovsky the Federal Cross of Merit last October. Within minutes of the award’s presentation, Lithuania’s main Internet news portal published a vicious attack calling Brantsovsky a mass murderer.

The state’s prosecution service will neither charge nor clear Rachel Margolis for her “crime” of surviving the Vilna ghetto, putting her in a legal limbo, which in effect makes it impossible for her to visit the country where she was born and where her parents are buried. “Tell your readers,” she told me, “that the anti-Semites will never succeed to turn history upside down, because the free world knows the truth. They know who the Nazis were and they know who the victims were. It’s really very simple.” She adds one more thing, from her home in Israel: “Tell them that I want to return once more to see my hometown, Vilna.”

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