

“We Are Here: Reflections on Research and the Holocaust”

By Ellen Cassedy

Ellen Cassedy has explored the world of the Lithuanian Holocaust for ten years. She is the **author** of [*We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*](#) (University of Nebraska Press, March 2012). She is a former columnist for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and has written for [*Hadassah*](#), [*Ha'aretz*](#), [*The Jewish Daily Forward*](#), [*Jewish Telegraphic Agency*](#), [*Lilith*](#), [*Bridges*](#), [*Polin*](#), and [*Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*](#), among other publications. She is a frequent **speaker** about Jewish and Lithuanian issues.

At the AJL Conference, Ellen spoke on a **panel** entitled “Lithuania Jewry Past and Future.” In her presentation, she describes how she began her project with the goal of connecting with her Jewish roots, but then pursued a larger investigation into how the former “Jerusalem of the North” is – and is not – engaging with the legacy of the lost Jewish culture. She reflects on how libraries can help to meet the evolving needs and interests of the successor generations after the Holocaust.

Contact Ellen at: www.ellencassedy.com.

I went to Lithuania looking for answers about my own Jewish family past. But my journey into the old Jewish heartland ended up transporting me far beyond my family story. It expanded into a ten-year exploration, not only about the past but also about the future.

Today I want to talk to you about the spirit in which I began my research, and how and why my goals changed. I'll conclude with some thoughts on the evolving needs and interests of people like me who seek out librarians like you for assistance with insight into the Holocaust.

My grandfather came to America from Lithuania in 1911 at the age of 19, escaping the draft. This is my Jewish grandfather, on my mother's side. The other side has to do with Ireland, which is where the name Cassedy comes from.

When my mother was alive, I could count on her to keep track of my grandfather and all those who had come before. But after she died, I felt my family past threatening to disappear. And when I learned of a summer institute in Yiddish in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, I was eager to go.

There are those who say it's not worth going back to the Old World because there's nothing there. I disagree. I wanted to breathe in the summer light of the vast Baltic sky. I wanted to stroll down the streets of Vilnius where my forebears had walked. I wanted to see the fields and barns where my great grandmother worked on a dairy farm, and the road that is still called Synagogue Street, where my great grandfather pored over the Talmud.

Mind you, I barely knew where Lithuania was. I had to get out an atlas to learn that it is the most southern of the three Baltic republics, with Latvia and Estonia on top. A republic of the Soviet Union from the end of World War II until 1991. Geographically less than half the size of California. Population: tiny -- 3 and a half million, about the same as Los Angeles.

One thing I did know was that Lithuania was a dicey place to go looking for a sense of belonging.

I knew that in 1941, when the German army invaded, the Jews of Lithuania were massacred with a swiftness and thoroughness that was unusual even for that time. It was the German invaders who issued the orders, but in most cases it was members of the Lithuanian White Armbands, the volunteer police, who pulled the trigger. I knew that hundreds of Lithuanian towns have their pit in the forest, not far from the market square, where Jews were assembled, shot, and hastily buried in mass graves.

I knew that in the three major Lithuanian cities, tens of thousands of Jews were confined in ghettos. Most were eventually killed. By the end of the war, only 6 percent of Lithuania's 240,000 Jews remained alive.

One of them was my Uncle Will. Before leaving for the Yiddish institute in Vilnius, I went to New York to see Uncle Will, and I brought some street maps I'd downloaded from the Internet.

My uncle was 87 years old. Sixty years had passed since he left Europe. But he could still put his finger on exactly where he'd lived and where he went to school.

But then my uncle did something that shocked me – something that radically altered my journey to the Old World. He motioned me into the kitchen and told me that while he was confined in the ghetto in the Lithuanian city of Shavl, or Siauliai, he'd been a member of the Jewish ghetto police.

I'd known my uncle all my life. All my life, I'd treasured heroic images of him in the Holocaust. I knew he'd saved two little girls during a round-up. I knew he'd saved my Uncle Aron's life on the death march out of Dachau. But this, being a member of the Jewish ghetto police, this I'd never heard.

As many of you know, in ghettos all across Europe, Nazi authorities required the Jews to create an internal police force with the job of carrying out Nazi orders. In some ghettos the Jewish police played a role in deciding who would live and who would die. But the Jewish police also saved people's lives by subverting Nazi orders, warning people, helping them escape.

The Jewish ghetto police were controversial among the inhabitants of the ghettos back then, and they have remained controversial ever since. Primo Levi, the eloquent survivor of Auschwitz, called them inhabitants of a "gray zone" where good and evil blur.

As Uncle Will revealed this new information from his past, the black and white picture of the Holocaust that I'd grown up with began to break apart. Good guys here, bad guys there – where did my uncle belong?

Then another bombshell fell. I'd written to Rokiskis, the shtetl, or small town, in the northeast corner of Lithuania where my ancestors had lived for generations, and now I heard back from an official there. She wrote that there was an old gentile man in town named Steponas who wanted to talk to me.

In 1941, as a boy of 17, Steponas watched as the Jews of Rokiskis were assembled in a field and driven into the forest to be shot. That knowledge had tormented him all his life, the town official wrote. He wanted to tell what he knew. He wanted to speak to a Jew before he died. Would I be that Jew?

I have to say I was not eager to be that Jew. And if not for what I'd just heard from Uncle Will, I think I might have said no. I might have turned away. But now the ground had shifted, and so I agreed. Yes, I would be that Jew.

And so I went to Lithuania. And on my first evening in Vilnius... (this is from my book):

A soft summer rain was falling as a white-haired woman made her way to the microphone. "*Tayere talmidim!*" she began. "Dear students!" Through the pattering of drops on my umbrella, I leaned forward to catch her words. The old woman's name was Bluma, a flowery name that matched her flowered dress. She was a member of the all-but-vanished Jewish community in Vilnius, the city once known as the Jerusalem of the North.

"How fortunate I am," she said in a quavering voice, "to have lived long enough to see people coming back to Vilnius to study Yiddish."

*Undzer yidish,
undzer shprakh
farmogt dokh
oytsres gor a sakh....*

This was a poem by Eliezer Schindler:

Our Yiddish,
our language,
possesses such
a wealth of treasures...

Seventy-five of us – students of all ages from all over the globe – huddled on the wooden benches clustered together on wet cobblestones. Around us, the damp walls of Vilnius University rose into the heavens.

As the rain continued to fall, I shivered. It was a complicated place, this land of my ancestors – a place where Jewish culture had once flourished, and a place where Jews had been annihilated on a massive scale.

The next morning, I hurried through the courtyard into the classroom, where we began at the beginning, with the alphabet, just like in the old days, when little Jewish boys used to start their lessons at the age of three. On their first day, the letters in their primers would be sprinkled with sugar, to show that learning was sweet.

In the afternoons, just as I had dreamed, the last Yiddish speakers of Vilna, now in their 80's, walked us through the streets of this beautiful city, where the twisting lanes of the Jewish quarter once swirled with crowds and political and intellectual ferment, synagogues, libraries, newspapers.

Imagining myself back into the former capital of Yiddishland was a *mekhaye*, a great pleasure. But because of my uncle's revelation, and because of the old man waiting to talk to me in Rokiskis, my journey to the Old World had taken a new turn. It had become a moral exploration, an exploration of buried truths and thorny complexities. A meta-exploration of what we do with the past.

And so I felt compelled to tiptoe across cultural boundaries. To give you a taste of what I found, let me take you to dinner, on a beautiful evening soon after I arrived in Vilnius. Again from the book:

Waving at me from an outdoor restaurant across Castle Street was Violeta, a middle-aged woman with a broad, fair face and blond hair, her solid body squeezed into a tight, fashionable jacket and matching skirt.

We sat down at a checkered tablecloth and ordered a decidedly un-Jewish meal of shrimp salad, then raised our wine glasses.

"L'chaim!" I said, offering the traditional Jewish toast. To life!

"I sveikata!" she responded in Lithuanian. To health!

A friend back home had connected me to Violeta, who was neither Jewish nor a professional history-confronter. I'd written and asked if she would talk to me about how her country was exploring its 20th-Century history, especially the Jewish tragedy, and she'd responded warmly, eager to help.

I took out my notebook. "Growing up in the Soviet era," I asked, "what did you learn about the Jews during the war?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and furrowed her brow. "We knew about Auschwitz and Buchenwald," she said. "We learned in school that many Jews died."

“Did you learn about the pits in the forests” – I made a digging motion with my hand – “where the Jews were shot and buried? The mass graves?”

Yes, she said, she had learned about this, too. She looked away, then met my eyes. “But...but,” she said, “no one taught us in school how many Lithuanians were sent to Siberia by the Soviet power, in 1940, in 1941, and also after the war. Pregnant women and children – they died in Siberia!”

Her voice grew louder. “Many Jews were involved in the Soviet system,” she said heatedly. “Many Jews worked in the KGB. The Jews were the ones who sent my people to Siberia.”

I looked around at the nearby tables where other city residents were talking and eating. No doubt some of them were also seething with such feelings. I, too, was seething, I found. I didn’t like hearing the massacre of my people placed side by side with the suffering of hers. I hated hearing my people blamed for the suffering of hers.

She sliced the air with her hand. “I want to say,” she declared, “that the Lithuanian people through all of history have loved other nationalities – Jewish people, Russian people, Polish people!” She paused. “That is, *normal* Lithuanian people loved others. The local men who helped round up Jews in 1941 were not normal people.

“But,” she said, “every nationality has some like this. Some abnormal people. Lithuanians as a whole should not be blamed for the actions of a few.”

After a moment her face changed. “I would like you to meet my mother,” she said. “I will take you to her apartment in my childhood town of Kedainiai.”

Kedainiai was not far from Siauliai, where members of my family had been confined in the ghetto. “I had family near there,” I said. “In Siauliai.”

“You have?” Violeta asked. “You have family in Siauliai?”

“I did,” I said.

“They are there now?”

“No, they *were* there.”

“They are?”

“They *were*.” I repeated.

She looked confused. “But they are not there now.”

“No,” I said. Of *course* they aren’t there now, I wanted to say, or scream. They were Jews! The Jews were killed or sent to concentration camps! Don’t you understand?

Was it just a grammar problem? Past tense, present tense? Or was Violeta simply unaware of the sheer magnitude of the Jewish annihilation? Did she not know that only a tiny percentage of the prewar Jewish community had survived?

I looked at my watch and stood up. Violeta rose with me, and we shook hands.

“When we visit my mother,” she said, “she will tell you how my family rescued Jews during the war.”

My mouth opened in amazement.

As we parted, I realized that what had happened with Violeta was, in a way, exactly what I was hoping for. I wanted to allow disparate voices to swirl around me. To lose my balance. To let the confusion build. To gather information in bits and pieces without trying to decide right away what it all meant. To recognize that the path ahead would be full of twists and turns, without trying to avoid the bumps and the jolts.

I *would* go to visit her mother, I decided.

I did meet Violeta’s mother, and it was an eye-opening and moving experience.

At times in Lithuania, I must say I felt overwhelmed by the sheer complexities of facing the past in the land of our ancestors.

But now let me introduce you very briefly to some of the people who helped me see a way forward from these complexities – brave souls, Jews and non-Jews, who are working to create a new public discourse, to bring the Holocaust out into the open, in an effort to build a more tolerant future.

These people educated me. They inspired me. They turned my visit to Lithuania into not only a journey of return but also an encounter with the future. They gave me reason for hope.

Ruta Puisyte is a young gentile woman who worked for the Jewish museum in Vilnius. Her job was to get in a truck and drive to small villages and towns, where she would jump out and set up a traveling exhibit, a series of panels about seven centuries of Jewish life in Lithuania.

Ruta told me that the word “Holocaust” was new to many of the local people. Most of them had never met a Jew.

She showed me the text of the booklet she was writing. Here are the questions she was posing:

What do you think of Albert Einstein's saying, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing"?

Have you ever been in a situation where someone needed your help and you didn't provide it? If so, why did you behave like others, rather than following your conscience?

Is there a connection between your answers and the behavior of people during the war?

These are the kinds of questions that Lithuanians today are being asked to grapple with. Tough questions. Searing questions. Questions that, frankly, I think all of us need to ask ourselves, no matter who we are or where we live.

I visited an organization called the House of Memory, unique in all of Europe, run by non-Jews, which has created a project, to help schoolchildren talk with their elderly family members about the lost Jewish world. (Instead of an expert coming in to tell them what to think, they talk to one another, in an atmosphere of respect.)

As these students draw maps of the old Jewish world, they find that world becoming vivid and personal. They begin to question and to change.

I met with two gentile women who were employed by the Lithuanian government to design curricula about the Holocaust for Lithuanians of all ages.

I often heard Lithuanians say that 1% of their countrymen had killed Jews, 1% saved Jews, and the other 98% were bystanders – and that if you add it all up, the score is even.

So I asked these women: How should we judge? How should we judge the bystanders? How should we judge Steponas, the old man waiting to speak to me in Rokiskis?

I was very struck by their answer. They said: Our mission is to ask this question, not to answer it.

"Our goal," they said, "is to transform ourselves from a society of bystanders into an active civil society."

The challenge facing these educators – all of them – is not easy. It's complicated by the fact that at the end of World War II, the Nazi retreat did not bring peace to Lithuania. As the three Baltic nations were incorporated into the Soviet Union, it was not an easy transition. A bloody resistance struggle went on for seven years. Tens of thousands of Lithuanians were deported to Siberia. Between 1940 and 1952, historians say, as much as one-third of the

Lithuanian population was lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions, and immigration.

And so, after nearly half a century under two different regimes, Lithuania became a cauldron bubbling and boiling with competing martyrdoms, resentments and hatreds.

Anti-Semitism is by no means absent in Lithuania today. I saw swastikas. There are neo-Nazi marches. Lithuania has a long way to go to truly face its Holocaust past. And I can't honestly tell you whether on the whole things are moving forward or backward in Lithuania today. Maybe both.

I do know that when anti-Semitic incidents do occur, some in Lithuania – Jews and non-Jews – are speaking up to condemn them.

This graffiti says, first “Up with a white Lithuania.” That's been crossed out, and in its place someone has written “Up with a world without racism.”

Both in Lithuania itself and after I came back, I plunged into the question of my uncle and the Jewish police. In my uncle's ghetto of Shavl, there was very little official documentation left behind – so this took quite a bit of work, involving Lithuanian, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English...many translators, and many librarians.

It was not easy for me to gain access to the Lithuanian national archives, but once I did, I found something very revealing. Among the records that were left behind by the KGB when the Soviet Union collapsed, I found the records of the trial of uncle's boss, the head of the Jewish ghetto police. After the war, under the Soviet regime, he was convicted of war crimes and exiled to Siberia with a 25-year sentence.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem emailed me the transcripts of oral histories that were conducted in Israel in the 1970's with people who had survived my uncle's ghetto in the city of Shavl. In these, I was able to examine the very painful choices faced by the leaders of the Jewish community there.

At the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, I found many highly individual memoirs written by people who shared my uncle's experiences in the Lithuanian ghetto. I also delved deeply into an extraordinary 200-page diary kept by the Jewish police in the Kovno ghetto – which is about to be published in English translation by Indiana University Press. This is an amazing document that helped me ponder the moral implications of my uncle's story.

Finally, in my ancestral town of Rokiskis, I did meet with Steponas.

We pulled up in front of a cottage with a steep tin roof. Steponas came out, bent, gnarled, with a stick, his face deeply lined and weathered. His wife in a housedress, several silver teeth. He didn't look at me. They got into the car, the old man in front with the driver, the woman in back with my guide and me.

He asked the driver to drive slowly through the town. Here, to the right of this flower bed, he said, was the camp. The Jews were driven here. They were told that if they did not give up their valuables, they would be drowned in the pond. After they gave up their valuables, they were driven over this bridge, into this field. All of these houses and barns were full of Jews.

I drove my wagon, he said, loaded with carrots past the camp. I threw carrots over the fence. The guards threatened to kill me.

The Jews were driven down the road. The White Armband police lined both sides of the road. (These were the Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis.) The White Armbands came from the villages and small towns all over this region. You needed a lot of people to guard such a huge crowd of Jews. Thousands of Jews.

Steponas began to weep. They took all the people, marching, he said. Even children and old people. It was all on my eyes, he said. I was watching.

We got out of the car. I went into the cottage: the wood stove up to the ceiling, the plaster walls painted bright green. I touched the battered pots, the cucumbers on the table.

Finally we did look at each other. He tapped his chest and looked into my eyes. It was terrible, he said. And I nodded and I shook his hand.

Meeting with Steponas was a profound and, for me, something of a life-changing encounter -- with a man who I came to see as not only a bystander. At times, he risked his own safety, his own life to help his Jewish neighbors. And, he was profoundly damaged by what he witnessed. The experience of watching while others were assembled to be murdered inflicted a deep wound.

(By the way, after meeting with Steponas, my guide and I stopped by the regional museum in Rokiskis, where we found two 50 year old scrapbooks that were compiled under Soviet orders, documenting the history of the local Jewish community and its destruction. How many times have we been told that in the Soviet Union the history of Jewish culture was suppressed and it was basically forbidden to mention the word Jew? These primary documents helped me see that the situation was much more complicated.)

In conclusion, I began my journey with the needs of a roots seeker, a Jewish genealogist. I then went to Lithuania expecting to make up my mind about my uncle the Jewish policeman and Steponas the bystander. I wanted to judge, once and for all. To find out the answers.

But by the time I completed my research – if it will ever be completed – I had come to believe, like the two educators I told you about, that our job in the second and third generations after the Holocaust is not so much to judge, to categorize, to put people in columns – victims bystanders, rescuers, good guys here, bad guys there.

Instead, the task as I see it is to try to understand. To ask the questions, not to answer them. In Lithuania, I came to understand that in this moral terrain, the journey itself matters very much. The serious attention we pay: this matters.

To ask, without expecting ever to be done with the asking – that is the work of a lifetime, and, in my view, the job of a librarian.

As time goes on, I think we will increasingly be called upon to widen our view of the 20th century. We'll see more investigations like mine, by people crossing cultural boundaries and asking difficult questions. We'll see more books like Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, which will require us to consider the experiences of many peoples in Hitler and Stalin's Europe.

During the most terrible times in the mid-20th-century, solidarity was often difficult if not impossible. For those people who personally experienced those times, it may be difficult or impossible, or even inappropriate, to move on beyond hatred. I would not ask that of anyone. But for people in the successor generations, I came to see different obligations and different opportunities.

Both inside Lithuania and around the world, can we honor our heritage and carry forward the memory of the six million without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past?

Can we as American Jews and friends of Jews forge a connection to a land where Jewish culture was annihilated?

Can we extend the bounds of empathy? Can we open our ears, our minds, our hearts, to the complex truths of a Violeta, a Steponas, an Uncle Will?

This, I believe, is where hope for the future lies, for Lithuania, for other countries seeking to move beyond conflict, for all of us who seek to prevent future genocides.

Libraries and librarians are preservers of our past, but also shapers of our future, with a vital role to play in helping us to stretch ourselves, to grow, to reach out and appeal to one another not as victims, bystanders, or collaborators, but as fellow beings with the capacity for moral choice.

Thank you for all that you've done, all that you do, and all that you will do.