

# Lithuania accuses Holocaust survivors of war crimes

*'I have fought once, I can fight again'*

• By DANIELLE SINGER

Fania Branstovsky is a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in Lithuania and a survivor of the Vilna Ghetto. To her government, though, she is a suspect.

Two weeks ago, two Lithuanian police knocked on the door of Rachel Margolis, a former Holocaust survivor and a fellow member of the Soviet Partisans, in hopes that they would be able to use Margolis as a witness to gain more information about Branstovsky's "crimes" during her participation as a partisan.

For a year now, Lithuania has investigated Branstovsky and Holocaust survivor Yitzhak Arad for war crimes related to their Soviet partisan activities during World War II.

The investigations have been publicized in Lithuanian newspapers and television stations, referring to the two as terrorists and murderers of innocent Lithuanian civilians.

Arad, who lives in Israel and formerly served as chairman of Yad Vashem, has been accused of killing Lithuanian civilians and members of the anti-Soviet resistance movement.

He claimed that the Lithuanian government was twisting the story, saying that it was actually the Lithuanian civilians who had been hostile to the partisans and were given

arms by the Lithuanian government to "defend themselves."

"What they are trying to do is rewrite history," said Arad. "The murderers of the Jews are now becoming the heroes of Lithuania and they are making [partisans] out to be criminals and murders."

Branstovsky is also being investigated for crimes that she is alleged to have committed as a partisan. Lithuanian newspapers, such as the *Lietuvos Aidas*, have accused her of killing inhabitants of the Kaniukai village on January 29, 1944.

Although she refused to comment about the specific event, Branstovsky said her participation in the partisans was not to commit murder, but in self-defense.

"My decision to join the group was because the group provided a desperate Jew during the Holocaust [an] opportunity for safety and to fight death," she told *The Jerusalem Post*. "A group of Jews banded with the Soviet fighters to defend our honor – so we would not just walk to our deaths."

Branstovsky still wants to continue living in Lithuania. Though she has considered moving to Israel, she said, her family and work are in Lithuania and she doesn't wish to leave them.

"Until it is absolutely neces-



FANIA BRANSTOVSKY

sary, I won't leave," she said. "I have fought once, I can fight again."

Lithuania had one of the highest death tolls of the Holocaust, with an estimated 212,000 Jews murdered.

Since the Lithuanian government gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, said Dr. Efraim Zuroff, director of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, it has done little to bring Lithuanians to justice for the murders of so many Lithuanian Jews.

"There have only been three Lithuanians who were responsible for many murdered Jews, put on trial – and all three got off unpunished," he said. "And here we have already two Holocaust survivors who are being accused of war crimes. Where is the justice?"

The Lithuanian Embassy and general prosecutor for Lithuania declined to comment on the investigations.