Separate worlds

In Vilnius "Juden raus" is heard on streets that saw the Yiddish culture bloom and die.

Zemaitijos Gatve was part of the old ghetto. Here the Holocaust is still an open wound between Jews and Lithuanians.
Darkness had fallen over Vilnius, but in Geliu Street a woman continues to sweep autumn leaves with her birch broom. Summer is definitely over, the trees have faded and the sidewalk becomes lifelessly clean in the dull gleam of the street lights.

On the other side of the street stands a dilapidated brick edifice that no one would have noticed had it not been for the sheen of the street light falling on a worn, sheet-metal copula.

The despoiled house on the slope leading down to Pylimo Street was once a well-known synagogue. The old woman sweeps up leaves in a quarter that has seen the Yiddish culture bloom and die.

To wander down Geliu in the evening dusk, to enter onto Pylimo, turn off towards Rudninkai, cross over to Mesiniu, cross German Street and step through the old gate leading into Jewish Street is to wander through world history.

These quarters made up the heart of East European Jewry. Once it was said that one should go to Lodz if one wanted to make money and to Vilnius if one wanted wisdom. Vilnius was alive with people versed in the Scriptures. According to legend, the city had 333 learned men who all knew by heart the Jewish scripts of wisdom, the 64 volumes of the Talmud.

In actuality Vilnius had more than one hundred synagogues and houses of worship, and dozens of schools for rabbis. Old paintings and photographs of Zydu Gatve (Jewish Street) and Stikliu Gatve (Glass-Blowers' Street) with their crowds of people, shops and colonnades make one think of quarters in Jerusalem's Old Town.

An 1897 census of Vilnius's population shows that the city then had 63,831 Jewish inhabitants, making up more than 40 percent of the population. Now it is quiet and empty on Jewish Street. I see only a couple of youths walking their dogs on the stretch of grass where the Strashun Library once was. This was the heart of Vilnius's rich intellectual Jewish life. Do the youths have any idea that they walk on holy ground? Do they realize that behind the library stood one of
Europe’s most sacred Jewish edifices, the magnificent Grand Synagogue that dated back to the 1630s, a Renaissance building in stone that could hold nearly four thousand people, and which had a magnificent ark in which the scripture rolls were kept?

What was left of Jewish culture and of the Jewish quarter after the Nazis’ devastation was shortly thereafter razed by the Soviet Communists – among other things, the ruins of the synagogue. In its place stands a day-care center, Soviet gray. On the other side of Jewish Street lies a basketball field. Most often it is desolate and the baskets have no nets. This district was demolished in order to admit light and air, but in vain. It is difficult to breathe here, and a dark historical shadow lies over the desolate courtyards around Zydu Street.

If one walks along Jewish Street towards the northeast, one crosses Glassblowers’ Street, which once, in the Jewish heyday, teemed with craftsmen and market stalls. Nowadays one finds some of Vilnius’s most beautiful hotels, guest houses and shops in this intersection. Charringly renovated, they almost conceal the area’s cruel history. The Lithuanian author Tomas Venclovska has stated that this quarter is generally liked, “but actually is our national shame.”

This quarter is where the heart of East European Jewry used to beat, but it also contained the portal to the Holocaust – Vilnius’s two ghettos. The Nazis’ systematic extermination of Europe’s Jews started here. There is a sad tone to Vilnius’s lure and seductiveness.

Vilne, Vilne, undzer heymshtot, Undzer benkshaft un bager.

Vilnius, Vilnius, our hometown, Our hope and our comfort.

Thus went the Yiddish song among people who for generations had found security here. But the words were to change and the music was to turn into nameless despair:

S’fren vegn tsu Ponar tsu, Sz, firt keyn veg tsurik.

All roads lead to Poneriai, There is no way back.

It was in Poneriai outside of Vilnius that the city’s Jews were exterminated. Here the pits of death and memorials fill the forest. More than 100,000 people were murdered here, around 70,000 of these were Lithuanian Jews. It is estimated that 94 percent of Lithuania’s almost 220,000 Jews were killed in the Holocaust. This means that Lithuania probably lost a greater proportion of its Jews than any other European country that was occupied by Nazi Germany.

Its history ought to make Vilnius a bulwark against neo-Nazism and xenophobia. But between the more than century-old buildings of the town’s proud and newly renovated grand boulevard, Gediminas, an alarming echo can be heard: “Juden raus, raus, raus.”

In March 2008, on Lithuania’s national holiday, a couple of hundred Lithuanian right-wing extremists marched through the old capital of Yiddish culture chanting “Out with the Jews” in Hitler’s language. The march lacked public authorization, but the police did not prevent it.

“This is not the first time”, says Fanja Brancovskaja dryly when I ask about her reaction to the Nazi march. The 86-year-old woman is hardened. She knows the deepest meaning of “Juden raus”. Her family was transported out of Vilnius’s ghetto and exterminated. “Are anti-Jewish sentiments growing in Lithuania?” I wonder.

“It may be the case”, answers Fanja Brancovskaja defiantly.

She is an old partisan, and I can imagine her telling off a neo-Nazi, more or less as Astrid Lindgren did in the famous picture where she pulls at a skinhead’s suspenders. But some of Fanja Brancovskaja’s old friends from the ghetto are fearful. There are those who now regret having stayed in Lithuania after independence rather than going abroad.

Ruta Puivyte, who is Assistant Director of the Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, believes that negative attitudes towards minorities are gaining strength in Lithuania. “Some 18 years ago I could not imagine that somebody would celebrate Lithuanian Independence Day by marching through the capital’s main boulevard with swastikas and slogans like ‘Juden raus’ and ‘Russians go away.’”

There are about three thousand Jews in Vilnius today, less than one percent of the city’s population. One of them is 28-year-old Arnon Finkelstein, whose grandmother survived the Kaunas Ghetto.

“I believe that 99 percent of those in the march have not met a Jew, but they still hate us”, he says.

Arnon Finkelstein is disturbed by the inaction of the police at the illegal demonstration.

“But the most shocking thing was that the politicians did not react. They are thinking of the coming elections.”

Not until there had been international reactions did President Valdas Adamkus speak up, while other leading politicians more or less tried to smooth it over, or blamed “Russian provocation” against Lithuania.

To condemn anti-Semitism does not win votes in Lithuanian society.

“In the Soviet era, everyone was taught the equal value of all Soviet citizens. Today Lithuanian society finds it difficult to accept its own multiculturalism, with respect to its history, culture, and social life. One reason might be that deep down in the hearts and minds of people there are layers of Catholic teaching, which has historically been predominant and therefore lacks experience sharing its existence with others”, Ruta Puivyte says.

Fanja Brancovskaja works as a guide for visitors to the Poneriai forest as well as to Vilnius’s old ghetto quarter, where she as a teenager joined the Jewish partisans who fought the Nazis. When the ghetto was emptied in September 1943, the then 21-year-old Fanja, together with a friend, managed to get out before German soldiers surrounded the quarter.

“I fled down the stairs and out through the yard”, she says, as we stand outside the house where she saw her family for the last time.

On her way out of Vilnius she saw the Germans close in on the ghetto, whose inhabitants were to be led away and exterminated.

After having fled, Fanja and her friend made it to the partisans in the Rudnikai forest outside of the city. Here Fanja participated in the fight against the German occupation forces as a member of Battalion Mstitel (Avengers). In July 1944, the Germans were driven from Vilnius.

In the spring of 2008, Lithuanian newspapers accused Fanja Brancovskaja of having committed war crimes as a partisan. On the basis of this information, the public prosecutor launched an investigation.

“Here they write all sorts of nonsense in the newspapers. It is not true!” says Fanja Brancovskaja.

By then 83 individuals had been questioned as witnesses.

Rimvydas Valentukevicius is Chief Prosecutor at the Department of Special Investigations at the Office of the Prosecutor General of Lithuania. He rejects all allegations of politically motivated investigations.

“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”, he says.

Chief Prosecutor Valentukevicius finds it strange that he gets so many questions from foreign journalists about Yitzhak Arad and Fanja Brancovskaja.

“Why is there so much interest in them? Is it only because they are Jewish? We have many different nationalities in our investigations – Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, a few are Jewish. But everyone is equal before the law”, says Valentukevicius.

But the world sees Lithuania’s inability or unwillingness to deal with its Nazi criminals as a fundamental problem. The Jews ask: Are the victims to be persecuted while the perpetrators go free?

The Lithuanian-Jewish Professor Irena Veisaite has...
pointed out that the Holocaust hardly figures in the collective memory of ethnic Lithuanians. Baltic people were not transported to the ghetto and gas chambers but rather to KGB’s torture-chambers and Siberia’s work camps. For them, the long years of Soviet repression have overshadowed the memory of Nazi domination. The Gulag overshadowed the Holocaust.

Since its independence in 1991, Lithuania has therefore taken much greater pains to hunt down Soviet war criminals than Lithuanian citizens involved in the murder of Jews. Around 200,000 Jews were murdered, but only three Lithuanians have been prosecuted for their participation in this crime, and none has served time in jail. Instead, it appears that the Office of the Public Prosecutor spends its time and resources investigating whether Jewish survivors committed war crimes after they had managed to flee the ghetto.

Dovid Katz is Academic Director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute and professor of Yiddish language, literature and culture at Vilnius University. He talks about a “witch-hunt” against former Jewish partisans, which is part of a greater political process, one that Katz has dubbed the “Holocaust Obfuscation Movement”.

“It cunningly seeks to minimize or deny the Holocaust via the mechanical, automatic, and frequently devious juxtaposition of Communism with fascism.”

“No other genocide has had the same scope as the Holocaust”, says Katz. He is convinced that the efforts to equate Nazi and Soviet crimes is meant to relativize, minimize and, in the end, “spin-doctor away” the murder of the region’s entire Jewish population.

According to Katz, several Eastern European nations are trying to shirk their responsibility for the Holocaust by means of a campaign within the European Union. He condemns the current discussion in the EU Parliament, initiated by, among others, Baltic representatives, with the aim of finding a definition of genocide that can be used for both Nazi and Communist crimes.

“Throw out the misguided and underhanded mix-and-match Nazi-Soviet declarations”, is professor Katz’s advice.

A couple of the Lithuanian institutions that Katz criticizes are the International Commissar mentioned above and the Lithuanian government’s Genocide and Resistance Research Center. The official objectives of the Research Center are to “establish historical truth and justice”, but, as a symptom of its one-sided research and information, Katz quotes the fact that the Center’s show window displays 18 books devoted to Soviet crimes and 2 devoted to various aspects of the Holocaust.

In November 2007, the Genocide and Resistance Research Center arranged the exhibition War after War at the Army Museum in Stockholm. It presented the Lithuanian guerrilla movement’s fight against the Soviet regime, i.e. Soviet militia.

In Sweden, the Forum for Living History has been criticized for its concentration on crimes against humanity under Communist regimes, but the Forum has in the past at least ventured into a comprehensive investigation of the Holocaust. In Lithuania, the Holocaust has never really been properly raised as an issue.

For half a century, the Lithuanians received no schooling in Jewish history. Under the Soviet regime, Jewish cultural and religious life was circumscribed. Jews were being discriminated against and in some cases persecuted. Their fate was practically eliminated from history teaching. The Holocaust was made into the murder of innocent “Soviet citizens”, ordinary victims of fascism and Nazism. Some generations of school children and students in Lithuania grew up without gaining real knowledge of the Holocaust. Andrius Kubilius, former Prime Minister, has stated that he, until 1990, had been ignorant of the fact that there had been a Jewish ghetto in Vilnius.

Ruta Puisyte was brought up in such ignorance. Her journey in life was to become symbolic of Lithuania’s long and painful journey towards the truth about the Holocaust.

Research on the extermination of Jews got a gingerly start in independent Lithuania. Its pioneers had to fight against ignorance, prejudice and open hostility when they began collecting material from the abundance of sources that had become available. Ruta Puisyte extols those who chose to take up the fight.

“The results of the Holocaust research were like...
One of the pioneers was a retiree, a former lawyer, who developed an interest in the fate of the Jews in his own home town. He wrote a paper on the subject, which he presented in 1996. Ruta Puisyte was present at the presentation, and subsequently began searching for literature on the Holocaust in Lithuania. She found that most of the available material was in English and to be found at the Jewish Museum.

"I read every book I found on their shelves. It had a depressing effect on me. In the moral sense, I somehow realized that I, who belong to the third post-Holocaust generation, am connected to those people, the perpetrators, as a Lithuanian and as part of this nation. I cannot get away from the fact that this is my heritage too. It was a relief to know that neither of my grandfathers had gotten involved in the shooting of Jews. They were both simple men, like those who did get involved. They could have grabbed a gun, as others did."

Ruta Puisyte decided to concentrate her research on events taking place in her father’s native town, Jurbarkas, which is located near the border with the formerly German East Prussia, now Kaliningrad. Hitler’s troops invaded Soviet Lithuania from across the East Prussian border on June 22nd 1941. One week later, on July 3rd, the mass murder of Jurbarkas’s Jewish population began.

In her Bachelor’s thesis, Ruta Puisyte named almost 700 of the more than 1,900 Jewish victims in Jurbarkas. But she also named more than 30 local perpetrators, including a few high school students. In Lithuanian historical research this was novel, and it provoked strong reactions.7

Some professors at the Historical Faculty of Vilnius University, where Puisyte was a student, found it difficult to acknowledge that many Lithuanians who fought for Lithuanian independence on the 23rd of June 1941 also participated in the mass murder of Jews. Ruta Puisyte was repeatedly faced with their argument: "Do you dare claim that the Lithuanian partisans shot the Jews?"

Ruta Puisyte’s efforts were met with little understanding. It was claimed that she had chosen the “jewish side” by focusing on the Holocaust in her studies.

"Some of the comments were indeed unpleasant. Privately, when we could not be overheard, a respected university professor would assure me: I will hang you, believe me!"

However, in 1997, her thesis was accepted at the university. When Ruta Puisyte wanted to broaden her research on the Holocaust, she needed to gain access to material from the recently opened former KGB archives. But here she was turned down because the Holocaust was not prioritized as a research subject. The suffering of the Lithuanian people in Soviet exile was given priority. She also faced a certain hostility, which was expressed in private with a comment about Jews being "Stalin-lovers who started the Communist revolution".

Due to the resistance she met at the KGB archives, Ruta Puisyte had to switch from Holocaust research in a specific region. Instead she chose to write her Master’s thesis on psychological portraits of local perpetrators. She received a poor grade on the finished thesis.

For two years, during her Master’s program, she had been an intern at the Jewish Museum. This, the university did not appreciate.

"But I wanted the witnesses, the living history", says Ruta Puisyte. She felt closer to the Holocaust survivors, who could teach her something about her subject, than to the professors, who were just on the verge of learning the painful truth.

"Anti-Soviet partisans and Nazis got rid of the Red Army. But within a week or so, the same people, the same hands, the same rifles turned against the Jews. Archival documents and testimonies prove it. They murdered civilians. They could not be heroes! During those years, this fact was difficult to accept, not only for ordinary people but for university professors as well", Ruta Puisyte points out.

She was a solitary student who did not have access to the whole historical account. But the facts that she had uncovered had shaken her. And society’s reaction was disappointing.

"Among other things, there was an apologizing approach to the Holocaust at the Genocide Center. Some publications praised the Nazi police, and the Holocaust survivors were not acknowledged as sources of information. All this was unacceptable."

A decade has passed and the atmosphere has changed somewhat. Some years ago Ruta Puisyte heard one Genocide Center historian acknowledge, as an obvious fact, that Pomeriai was the place of terrible atrocities and genocide.

"Previously, arguments that served to diminish the number of victims were common, as if a smaller number would make the crime as such less terrible."

The Yiddish Institute where Ruta Puisyte now works has a good reputation in international academic circles – something she hopes will guarantee its continued existence.

Even outside the university the climate is now less constrained.

"Twenty years ago you could not mention the fact that Lithuanians took part in the Holocaust, but today it is easier. Fifteen years ago you could not get hold of regular books about the Holocaust. Today they are available", says Simon Davidovich, Director at the Sugihara Museum in Kaunas, which is dedicated to the Japanese diplomat who, in the same spirit as Raoul Wallenberg, saved thousands of Jews from the Holocaust.

But the change in attitude is an extremely slow process. When the topic of World War II comes up, Lithuanian media are more often subjective (anti-Jewish) than objective. In the schools, both the Holocaust and the Gulag are supposed to be taught, but in reality the crimes of Communism dominate.

The former partisan Fanja Brancovskaja has lectured about the Holocaust in German and Austrian schools, but she has not been asked to do so in Lithuania. Soon there will be no survivors left to do this. In any event, they would not find it easy to do so in Lithuania, where they risk being accused of having Soviet affiliations.

"Soviet tanks, which fought the Nazis, did liberate the handful of remaining Jews, whether they were in Auschwitz, in the Rudnikai forest or hiding in the ghettos. Are Lithuanians ready to forgive the Jews this ‘guilt’?" Ruta Puisytes asks rhetorically.

Irena Veisaite is a linguist and professor of the history of theater. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Soros-supported foundation Open Society in Lithuania. She has had to fight against anti-Semitism her whole life and is the only one in her family who survived the Holocaust. Before the ghetto in Kaunas was cleared out, she was saved by a Catholic Lithuanian woman, Stefanija Ladigien, who had six children of her own. This woman took in Irena as part of the family.

"We did not know that Irena was a Jew", her step-sister Marija Ladigait tells me.

For reasons of security, the children were kept ignorant of Irena’s background. They were merely told to treat her like a sister. A disclosure outside the home could have led to death at the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For Marija Ladigait, as a Catholic, the memory of the Holocaust is like an open wound.

"It is terribly painful, that this happened in our country, that so many innocent people were killed." This strong reaction is not common among Lithuanians in general. The Holocaust is not a natural part of the Lithuanian collective memory, as Irena Veisaite points out.

"But if you want to get rid of the burden, you have to talk about it", she says.

The truth hurts, but silence kills. This was the slogan of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Author Tomas Venclova objects to the claim that the Jews were murdered not by the Lithuanians but by “dregs”. “He who wants to be a true nationalist cannot get around taking responsibility in the name of his own people”, Venclova believes.

According to Venclova, it is the duty of the Lithuanian state and its intellectuals to illuminate the ques-
Have Palestine and Israel been the world’s focal point for six decades because Yiddish culture was not allowed to exist in Vilnius?

It was not one single ethnic group that murdered Jews. The executioners were Europeans. When Yiddish culture was eradicated, the concept of Europe changed for all time. After the Holocaust we can no longer speak of European values in the same sense as before. Europe shrank spiritually. The desolate and dreary backyard at Jewish Street in Vilnius symbolizes Europe’s poverty. Its desolation stands in stark contrast to the old paintings and photographs of the blossoming Yiddish culture that teemed in the alley-ways of pre-Holocaust Vilnius. When Europe’s Jews were exterminated, something essential to Europe was destroyed. The Estonian writer Jaan Kaplinski (of Jewish descent) claims that in Israel one can see “the Jews’” revenge on Europe, which was forced to get along without their intellectual capital."

"Israel would have been created without the Holocaust, but without the Holocaust the Yiddish culture would have been the most living culture in Eastern Europe", claims Yiddish Professor Dovid Katz.

Not only Europe but also the Jewish culture was changed when the comforting reassurance of the Yiddish songs was silenced:

Unter dayne vayse stern
Shtrek tsu mir dayn vayse hant,
Mayne verter zaynen tren,
Viln ruen in dayn hant.

Through your shining stars give me
Your comforting hand,
my words are but tears,
only in Your embrace will I find solace.

According to Katz, Zionism set out to create “a new Jew”, who would resemble the ancient Hebrew-speaking Israelites far more than the Yiddish-speaking modern European Jews of Lithuania. There was a feeling of shame for the Diaspora Jew, and Yiddish was seen as an inferior language of the Ghetto. In Palestine the Hebrew-speaking secular Zionists felt contempt for the Yiddish-speaking religious Jews who came, many of them from Vilnius and Lithuania, to study the Torah and pray in the Land of Israel, but who refused to take up arms to fight for it."

The dusk that descended on Vilnius was the harbinger of what was to become Europe’s darkest night, which at the break of dawn would make way for the genesis of the Jewish state Israel. But daybreak and dusk are simultaneous on our planet. The Jewish war of liberation became a catastrophe for the Arabs. Those who wish to gain an understanding of today’s Middle East cannot ignore Vilnius’s history. Have Palestine and Israel been the world’s focal point for six decades because Yiddish culture was not allowed to exist in Vilnius?  

Irena Veisaite hopes that, in Lithuania, the next generation will find it easier to talk about the Holocaust. It takes time to open a dialogue and reach mutual understanding. She points out that in Germany it has taken three decades to break the silence surrounding the Holocaust. Lithuania does not yet have an entire generation which has lived in an open society. But the hopes are not supported by scientific research. According to a poll presented in March 2008 by the Center of Ethnic Studies, negative attitudes against ethnic minorities are more common among youngsters than among seniors in Lithuania.

Irena Veisaite talks about the Holocaust in a manner that has upset both Lithuanians and Jews. She does not mince matters when she speaks about the Lithuanians’ responsibility, but she strives for mutual understanding through dialogue. Her words grate on many of those who, like her, have survived the Holocaust.

"You can not expect people to be heroes. There was such confusion. It was so terrible. Everything happened so fast."

Irena Veisaite resists labeling people and groups as guilty because of some individuals’ misconduct. She is careful to differentiate between miscreants and innocents, between tormentors and ordinary people.  

"I have met many Lithuanians who loved the Jews and who are sorry for what happened. The Lithuanians have a special word for a person who kills Jews, they talk about Jew-shooters (zydsdaus).

Irena Veisaite, who lost her entire family in the Holocaust, but who was saved by a Lithuanian family, believes that Lithuanians and Jews bemoan their respective tragedies without listening to each other.

"They have to stop competing to be the ones who were most victimized", she says.

Irena Veisaite will never forget her mother’s and other relatives’ fate. But she has not survived in order to take revenge. She has learned from the Holocaust. “I have learned that it is unethical to compare sufferings. Everyone’s suffering is worst.” But above all, Irena Veisaite’s horrible experience makes her a living warning.

"I went through this so that I would never do the same to anyone. Hostility towards others is dangerous.”

REFERENCES

1. Tomas Venclova, Former av hopp (Forms of Hope), Lund 2001, p. 571.
2. From the songs “Vilne” by L. Volfson and “Shhtiler, shhtiler” by Shmerke Kaczerginski respectively.
3. The organized mass murders were, in Lithuania, committed during the summer and fall of 1941, one year before the extermination camps in Auschwitz and Treblinka in Poland came into use.
4. In July 2008, at least four previous partisans had been questioned or were wanted for questioning.
8. Tomas Venclova, Former av hopp, p. 57.