

Nazi crimes have been downgraded in Lithuania

By ESTHER GOLDBERG

Sept. 14, 2001, found me on an Air Canada flight bound for the United Kingdom. I had bought my ticket weeks beforehand; the irony was that Sept. 14 was the first day that planes again took to the sky after 9-11.

I was on my way to Warsaw to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, and to Vilna for Yom Kippur. In between these two holy days was Sept. 23, which in 2001 was the first “National Day of Shame” in Lithuania in memory of the Shoah. Sept. 23, 1943, was the beginning of the end of the Vilna Ghetto, and 2001 was the 60th anniversary of the June 1941 German invasion that brought the Holocaust to Lithuania.

In 2000, Lithuania signed the Stockholm Declaration at the International Forum on the Holocaust, and Great Britain was assigned to oversee Lithuanian remembrance and education of the Shoah. Among the events honouring Sept. 23, 2001, was the launch of the Lithuanian edition of Martin Gilbert’s Holocaust history for schools, *Never Again*, and its presentation to Lithuanian schools by the British government.

Black ribbons hung from flagpoles on former Jewish buildings throughout Lithuania; markers on the highways pointed to the mass-murder sites of Lithuania’s Jews; official programs were held at the killing centres of Ponar, near Vilnius, and the Ninth Fort, near Kaunas; and the rebuilt Jewish Theatre in Vilna was opened as a Museum of Tolerance. It was a day of hope – that this blood-soaked former Soviet Socialist Republic that had struggled to break free of an oppressive and stifling history would change, and look to the West. Even the clocks were reset to European – not Russian – time.

The next day, Sept. 24, taking advantage of those who had come for the commemoration, among them Yitzhak Arad, the former chairman of Yad Vashem, and Gilbert, a meeting of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania was held. In the title lies the problem: to Lithuanians today, the crimes of the Soviet regime and the crimes of the Nazi regime are equal. How can this be? The crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators, in the form of the hunting down, terrorizing and murder of 90 per cent of Lithuania’s Jewish community along with the thousands of Jews who were deported to Lithuania to their deaths, were atrocities of devastating proportion. The crimes against humanity, perpetrated by the Soviet authorities, in the form of the deportation of thousands of Lithuanian citizens – Jews among them – to the gulags of Siberia, along with the 50-year occupation and ruthless rule of Soviet Russia was a tragedy. To its credit, Lithuania was at the forefront of bringing down that Soviet regime.

Where do the Jews fit into the “Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes”? Jews were the main victims of Nazi genocide, organized by the 1,000 *Einsatzgruppe* members assigned to the three Baltic countries, and carried out with the help of local collaborators: 20 battalions of local volunteers in the case of Lithuania. The countries assigned to the Soviet Union with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of Aug. 23, 1939, were each desperate to regain their own independence. They viewed their Jews as collaborators with the Soviets – from the “Jews and Bolsheviks” propaganda of Hitler’s regime – and because individual Jews had been at the forefront of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, hoping to get better treatment than they had under the Czars. The fury unleashed by the Lithuanians on the Jews in 1941 was bred-in-the-bone anti-Semitism from the Catholic Church and from the political establishment who saw the Jews as their oppressors.

By combining the examination of the crimes of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes, and by calling the Soviet occupation “genocide,” Lithuania has not denied the Holocaust or that one Jew died. Instead it is playing a game of victimhood that is implicit in the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism of June 3, 2008. It states that “millions of victims of communism and their families are entitled to enjoy justice, sympathy, understanding and recognition for their sufferings, in the same way as the victims of Nazism have been morally and

politically recognized.” In theory, this sounds fair. In practice, in Lithuania, and in Latvia and Estonia, it has led to frightening developments because the two totalitarian regimes are equated. In effect, the Soviet regime’s crimes are upgraded and the Nazi regime’s crimes downgraded. The devastation incurred becomes a “double” genocide.”

Currently, throughout Lithuania, the plaques on former Jewish buildings and black ribbons are displayed for the “tourist season.” Then they come down. But displaying the swastika, a “valuable symbol of the Baltic culture,” has been legally allowed in Lithuania’s third-largest city, Klaipeda. The state “Genocide Museum” in Vilnius has no reference to the Holocaust – a search on its website has only one mention of Jews, that during the Nazi occupation “about 200,000 Jews were killed in Lithuania, and about 45,000 people of other nationalities were killed,” but the “Holocaust Exhibit” part of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, located at the “Green House,” is now closed for renovation – some fear evisceration. Its curator Rachel Kostanian is harassed and continually in fear of losing her job. Even the “National Day of Shame” of 2001 is now called the “National Memorial Day for the Genocide Victims of the Lithuanian Jews.” No Lithuanians have been brought to justice for their collaboration efforts in killing Jews, but four elderly Jewish former partisans live in fear of arrest. Reminiscent of George Orwell, some are more equal than others.



Rachel Kostanian is being investigated by Lithuanian authorities. The subject of an essay by Esther Goldberg, which appeared in *The CJN*’s Rosh Hashanah supplement this year, Kostanian has devoted her life to the Green House Holocaust Exhibit in Lithuania and to Holocaust education in Lithuania.

What changed since those hopeful days of September 2001? Was the respect and sensitivity to Jewish suffering, then – as it is now – merely for show, for western visitors, for leaders of important Jewish organizations who are given kavod and when they are gone, the Jew symbols are put away? The Lithuanian elections in 2008 brought Andrius Kubilius back to power, heading a right-wing party composed of a merger of the Union of Political Prisoners and the Exiled and Christianical Democrats, with the Lithuanian National Union. The mood of the country has shifted to the right with the interest in Lithuanian history focused on the trauma of Soviet occupation. Jews do not have an explicit place in that history; instead the implication of Jewish duplicity pervades every aspect of it.

Jews were always a small minority among the leaders, functionaries and secret police of the Lithuanian Communist regime; it was the Lithuanians who imposed communism at every level of society in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. With the current condemnation of communism – but not of their fellow Lithuanians – Jews have become a convenient target. The language of the Prague Declaration reflects this by condemning communism, implying “Jewish communism.” The declara-

tion’s subtext is that Soviet crimes were essentially Jewish crimes. Yet on the other hand, the Prague Declaration appeals for an equivalency to the way the Holocaust has been “morally and politically recognized.” Jews are acknowledged when dead and when honoured by other Jews.

The greatest irony in this situation is the way Jewish partisans are viewed in Lithuania today. Arad fought with Soviet partisans against the German occupiers and has written extensively on his experiences, and on Lithuanian collaboration with the Germans. In 2007, the Lithuanian government asked Israel to extradite Arad for questioning concerning crimes against Lithuanian citizens during his time as a partisan, based on material in his memoir. Israel refused the extradition. The website of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, of whom Arad was a member, now lists him as “suspended,” along with Gilbert, who resigned in protest to the “grotesque indignity” of seeking to bring Arad to trial.

Joseph Melamed, a survivor from Kovno and a decorated partisan who has been active with the Israel-based Association of Lithuanian Jews, protested in 1998, at the time the commission was established, against combining the two tragedies. In a letter to then-president Valdas Akamkus, he wrote: “This false symmetry has been a major obstacle to any serious soul-searching by Lithuanian society in regard to the extensive collaboration of Lithuanians with the Nazis in the murder of Lithuanian Jews. Even worse, false accusations and patent exaggerations regarding Jewish participation in Communist crimes against Lithuanians have been adduced time and again to explain, and in some cases even justify, the participation of Lithuanians in the murder of Jews during the Holocaust.” Although Melamed lives in Tel Aviv, on Holocaust Remembrance Day this year, Jan. 27, Lithuanian prosecutors visited the Jewish community offices in Vilna to question the leaders of the Jewish community about him.

Rachel Margolis was a former partisan from Vilna, and one of the founders of the Green House Holocaust Exhibit. Her memoir, has, like Arad’s, been combed for references – taken out of context – to the killing of Lithuanians. Living in Israel since 2009, she is afraid to return to Lithuania where she may also face arrest.

The fourth aging survivor is Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky, the librarian of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute of Vilnius University and a former partisan. In 2009, she was honoured by the German embassy in Vilnius with the Cross of Merit for strengthening the unity between Germans and Jews of central and eastern Europe. Yet she is under suspicion by the Lithuanians of committing crimes against humanity during her time as a partisan. She travels in Lithuania with a protective “firewall” of ambassadors, from, among other countries, Ireland, Britain, Norway and the United States.

The four survivors under investigation, along with Kostanian, who has devoted her life to the Green House Holocaust Exhibit and to Holocaust education in Lithuania, should be honoured by their fellow Lithuanians as heroes. Instead they are demonized and harassed, castigated and terrorized. This is the “National Shame” that Lithuania should be addressing.

Given the type of Orwellian doublethink that consumes Lithuania today, visiting Jewish dignitaries who come as guests are treated to the treasures of Lithuania that they want to find. When the guests leave, the moral cupboard is bare. For a country and a region emerging into western European civilization, exalting in the freedoms it fought through much of the last century to enjoy, those who care about its people and its history hope it can reconcile the traumas of its past, and build a future that rises above victimhood to embrace tolerance of and appreciation for its Jewish minority.

Esther Goldberg is the creator and editor of three volumes of Holocaust Memoir Digest, published by Vallentine Mitchell, which include Samuel Bak’s memoir of Vilna, Painted in Words (www.holocaustmemoirdigest.org).

A related but somewhat different story about the Jews of Lithuania is on page 18.