

## Distortions of Holocaust history in Lithuania today

While I have had a long-held interest in Eastern European Jewish history and culture, my interest was renewed last summer by the experience that I was lucky enough to have as a student in the Vilnius Yiddish Institute summer program. Every year, this program brings students from all over the world to Vilna, the traditional heart of Jewish learning, to study the Yiddish language and learn about Ashkenazic culture. The program's location in Lithuania provides an invaluable link to the period when Yiddish was the common folk language of all European Jews. At the same time, however, this key piece of the modern Yiddish renaissance seems to have been weakened as it has bowed to pressure from the modern-day Lithuanian government. One may be surprised to find out what this pressure relates to: the role of Lithuanians as perpetrators in the Holocaust, and the related effort by certain elements in Lithuania to convey themselves as victims of an equal genocide (by the Soviets) to what the Jews suffered under the Nazis.

One key part of this effort is the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, also known as the KGB museum. When I visited there on my own, before I knew about any of this, I was struck by the fact that it was in the style of a Holocaust museum, and even covered the time period before and after the Nazi occupation in which Lithuanian partisans were fighting against the Soviets, but said virtually nothing about the Holocaust. My response at that point was, OK, I'm sure living under the Soviets wasn't pleasant, and I have sympathy for that...but for them to present the "history of genocide" in a way that almost entirely ignored the true genocide suffered by the Jews of Lithuania seemed troubling. Indeed, even in the one location in the museum that does mention the Nazi Holocaust (a small display in a hallway that lists the total number of victims of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes), they attempt to show that each regime affected a similar number of people in Lithuania by showing equal totals. Of course, this math only works if you count those Lithuanians who were imprisoned, sent to Siberia, or otherwise harassed, but still (in many cases) allowed to live and eventually return home, as equal in their victimhood to the Jews who were murdered by the Nazis. This just doesn't work.

It was only later that I learned that what I had seen in the Genocide Museum reflected something broader than willful ignorance of the depth of Nazi atrocities. Indeed, the official telling of history in Lithuania today seems to say that Soviets were worse than Nazis. For instance, some of the people honored in the Genocide Museum for their work against the Soviets after World War II were actually Nazi collaborators during the war, and some even murdered Jews themselves while the Nazis were in power, but this is ignored. Even more shocking, the Lithuanian government today has threatened to arrest and prosecute Jewish Holocaust survivors for supposed crimes against Lithuanian civilians. What was their crime? They fought in groups of Soviet-sponsored partisans during WWII in the campaign against the Nazis, and thus, according to certain nationalist elements in Lithuania, they must be considered perpetrators of the Soviet genocide on the Lithuanians. Of course, at the time and place where this happened, there weren't any other Allied

forces in the area that could help in a guerilla campaign against the Nazis. And for many of the Jews who were in the partisan movement, the only real alternative at that point was to succumb to certain death at the hands of the Nazis. I should also note that the Lithuanian authorities have not gone after Nazi collaborators with any seriousness, nor even after non-Jewish Soviet collaborators. They have only been interested in going after the Jewish former partisans who courageously fought the Nazis under the most difficult of circumstances.

One of these heroic Jews is Fania Brantsovsky, today the librarian of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, who at age 88 is still telling her amazing story and leading tours of Jewish Vilna. Another was Rokhl Margolis, also age 88, who was a part of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute summer program until this controversy began in 2008. In addition to her heroic story as a partisan, Margolis discovered and painstakingly pieced together in the 1990's the diary of a Polish journalist who witnessed the killing of Jews in the Ponar forest near Vilnius. Both of these women have been threatened with arrest for supposed atrocities committed during their time as partisans. (It should be noted that even if they did harm Lithuanian "civilians" in partisan operations, those "civilians" likely would have been armed by the Nazis, and the partisans likely would have had to fight back to avoid being killed.) Fania has continued her work in Vilnius, and so far, the Lithuanian government has not actually arrested her. They did, however, send police officers to look for her in May 2008 before eventually declaring her a fugitive. Given that her office is almost directly across the street from Lithuania's presidential palace, this was presumably to avoid the spectacle that her arrest would create while still appeasing the right-wing internal elements pushing for her arrest. Still, they have refused to drop the investigation, and could still arrest her in the future. Rokhl Margolis lives primarily in Israel, and while she previously spent every summer in Lithuania telling her story, she has not returned since this controversy began because she fears being interrogated or arrested by the Lithuanian authorities.

Now, it may not be entirely surprising to hear that right-wing elements in a country that was among the most complicit in the atrocities of the Holocaust have successfully pressured their government to harass some of the few Jews that remain there 65 years later. However, what is surprising is that the Vilnius Yiddish Institute has bowed to pressure from the government as part of this same campaign, and is helping to obfuscate historical truths inconvenient to the preferred narrative of modern-day Lithuania. Why would it be in their interests to do that? The answer seems to be that the Lithuanian government is willing to provide support to the Institute in exchange for some measure of control. This may seem odd, but according to the analysis of Dovid Katz, whose role in fighting these iniquities I will discuss further below, the Lithuanian government is willing to support Jewish-related projects that bring Jews from America, Israel, and elsewhere to visit their country. They appear to do this to fight charges of anti-Semitism and make their country look better in the eyes of the international community, even while they act in other ways that are blatantly anti-Semitic but are more subtle. In any case, the Lithuanian authorities have apparently pressured the Institute, with some degree of

success, to stay away from topics that are controversial in Lithuania. Thus, they appear to be refocusing on Yiddish language education and sanitized aspects of cultural history, and downplaying topics such as Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust and the heroic efforts of Jewish partisans.

Of course, it is outrageous for a Jewish institution to shy away from these topics. I should point out that at least to my knowledge, Fania's affiliation with the Institute has not been threatened. However, in 2009, in contrast to previous years, the program did not include Fania's tour of the remnants of the partisan base where she lived in the forest during the war. As I understand it, even Fania did not know until the last minute that we would not be visiting the partisan base after she led us through the Vilna Jewish cemetery and the Ponar mass graves; she only found out after asking the Institute staff who were with us that day. When some of my fellow students asked why we weren't going to the partisan base, we were told that it was just too difficult to get a bus in there, and that anyway, it was "just a forest" and there was nothing to see there. Luckily, some members of our group arranged a trip to go with Fania to the partisan base on our own, and I realized then that it was much, much more than "just a forest". To hear Fania tell firsthand her story of how she escaped from the Vilna ghetto just hours before it was liquidated (at which point all of its inhabitants, including her entire family, were murdered), made it to the forest with a friend, after some fortuitous assistance from a local farmer, and survived in the forests despite immense difficulty, was fascinating. This opportunity to hear Fania's story, and to see the place where it happened, was one of the most moving parts of the entire month, and I cannot imagine that it would have been left off the program for any reason other than political considerations.

It is also worth noting that the controversy has affected the Yiddish Institute in other ways. For one, the 2009 program did not have a director for the cultural portion of the summer program. This was reputedly because the man who had led the cultural program had, the previous summer, helped the students compose a letter to the Lithuanian government protesting their actions against Fania and others. He was therefore uninvited for 2009, and was not replaced for the summer. I believe this was noticeably detrimental to the quality of what was in other ways an excellent program, but it appears that the Institute's leadership was willing to take this action anyway in order to appease the relevant authorities. In addition, it appears likely that Prof. Dovid Katz, a distinguished scholar of Yiddish linguistics and founder of the Yiddish Institute, born in Brooklyn but residing in Lithuania since 1999, will have his association with the Institute terminated soon because he has been leading the campaign against the Lithuanian government on this issue. While I was not familiar with his work before I arrived in Vilnius, Prof. Katz's brilliant work on the Yiddish language was the motivation for many of my fellow students came to Vilna. But yet, he was not on the official program last summer. Luckily, Rokhl Kostanian, director of the "Green House" Holocaust museum in Vilnius and leader of some of our historical tours of the city, introduced us to this issue, and told us to contact Dovid Katz directly to learn more. Some of my fellow students did so, and ended up arranging a "secret" lecture by Dovid Katz, hosted by

students in the program, where he introduced us to this Holocaust obfuscation issue. This led to another student-organized lecture about his fascinating work on the history and future of the Yiddish language, and also to the student-organized trip to the partisan bases.

While we were very fortunate to have these experiences, students may not be so lucky in future summers. Rokhl Kostanian's own position as director of the Green House has been threatened in part because her Holocaust museum is the only museum in Lithuania that talks openly about Lithuanian complicity with the Nazis, which the authorities would like to suppress. Ms. Kostanian is also in poor health, in part as a result of this continued fight with the authorities. In addition, while Dovid Katz is currently working with Prof. Mikhail Iossel of Concordia University to establish a new, independent Litvak Studies Institute in Vilnius, which will allow him to continue his excellent and important work in Lithuania, this effort does not yet have the established base of support that VYI has had. Even if their efforts are successful, this unfortunate state of affairs will likely do serious harm to the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, which for the past 9 years has been an important Jewish cultural center in Eastern Europe. And if their efforts were to fall short and Dovid Katz were to have to leave Lithuania, the entire nascent Jewish cultural renaissance in Eastern Europe would likely be irreparably weakened.

So, what can we as American Jews do about this? First, on the broader issue, we must raise awareness of the insidious nature of the effort by the Baltic states to minimize the historical stature of the Holocaust. Their campaign has been subtle; on the surface, it is portrayed as an effort to study all instances of European genocide, which would seem uncontroversial. Indeed, probably in part because of this, the Baltic states have made progress (via the 2008 Prague Declaration) towards getting their Nazi-Soviet double genocide theory accepted as the official version of history for students throughout all of Europe, not just in the Baltic states. They have also gained support from Jewish groups who have not fully investigated the matter. The Jewish community must come out strongly opposed to the efforts of the Baltic states on this matter. While we do not want to minimize the unjustifiable atrocities that the Soviet authorities committed against the Lithuanians, it is important to note that only under the Nazis was merely being born into a particular ethnic group a crime punishable by death. The Nazi-perpetrated genocide must be seen as a truly unique campaign to brutally exterminate an entire people, and any effort to obfuscate that status must be treated with great suspicion.

We can also try to improve the situation for Jewish learning in modern Eastern Europe. One thing to note is that much of the independent financial backing for the Vilnius Yiddish Institute has come from the generosity of American Jews. These individuals in particular must insist any institution that they support resist pressure from the Lithuanian government on the issue of Holocaust obfuscation rather than acquiescing to it. If the leadership of the Yiddish Institute refuses to do so, support could be transferred to the new Litvak Studies Institute. We must ensure either way that the institutions dedicated to the study of Jewish culture in

Lithuania are able to maintain intellectually deep and historically honest academic programs. Vilnius is a beautiful city with an amazing history of Jewish learning, and that is a wonderful asset to build on. Still, I felt that the VYI summer program was made special by the diverse group of extremely bright students from many different perspectives, most of whom travelled halfway around the world to be there because of a deep curiosity about Yiddish and Jewish culture. Thus, while I realize that the Institute is in a difficult position, I believe that it is endangering itself even further by giving in to pressure from the Lithuanian government and, by extension, from the anti-Semitic right-wing elements that originated that pressure. The sanitized version of history that the current director of the Yiddish Institute, Dr. Sarunas Liekis, seems willing to accept is not the way to draw people in to the small but growing community of Yiddish enthusiasts. Indeed, if the one historical lecture that Liekis gave to the students in the program is any indication, his perspective was unable to capture the interest of even an audience that had already travelled thousands of miles to learn about Jewish history and culture. Dovid Katz, on the other hand, is a fascinating, charismatic, colorful character, in addition to being an internationally recognized scholar, and students of all ages in the program were eager to learn from him when we had the chance. But he is also controversial, and thus he is the one who has been sidelined. I do not mean to imply that Katz's charisma makes all of his positions incontrovertibly correct, of course, but the contrast does emphasize the serious flaws in Liekis' approach. Thus, in addition to the more broadly important struggle against Holocaust obfuscation (about which more information can be found at Dovid Katz's Web site, [www.HolocaustInTheBaltics.com](http://www.HolocaustInTheBaltics.com)), American Jews must do what we can to prevent further unfortunate acts of cowardice by the leadership of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute. We must also help Dovid Katz with his efforts to set up an alternative institution in Vilnius dedicated to Litvak history, language, and culture that will not ignore the truth about the Holocaust in Lithuania, and which will fight any efforts to tarnish the legacies of heroic Holocaust survivors. The future of Jewish learning in modern Eastern Europe may depend on these efforts.

*Michael Cohen is a graduate student in cognitive psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He may be reached by E-mail at [mcohen1@ucla.edu](mailto:mcohen1@ucla.edu).*