



The Museum of Genocide Victims is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Lithuania. It's also a disingenuous attempt to divert attention away from the sizable role Lithuanians played in the Holocaust, while portraying the local population as victims rather than perpetrators.

Located in Vilnius, the national capital, the museum is just around the corner from a giant statue of a guitar-playing John Lennon entitled "Imagine." But whereas the utopian Beatles song tries to imagine a world with a better and different future, the museum curators try to fantasize a national history with a better and different past – one that omits or downplays Lithuanian collaboration in the Holocaust.

Despite the marquee use of the word, genocide, when the museum opened in 1992, none of the exhibits mentioned the decimation of the country's Jewish population during World War II. In post-Soviet Lithuania, the term, genocide, has been used first and foremost in connection with the Soviet occupation.

Indeed, the large, drab building housing the museum, which once served as KGB headquarters, vividly conveys Soviet brutality. The nightmarish interrogation rooms, prison cells and execution chambers are all authentic and chillingly evocative. Particularly striking

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is a solitary confinement cell in the basement where prisoners stood on a small elevated slab of concrete surrounded by ice-cold water. When they dozed off they would fall into the freezing pool.

It was only in 2011, in response to Jewish-

led protests, that a tiny exhibit dealing with the Holocaust was added to the museum. One of the leaders of the outcry was Dovid Katz, an internationally renowned Yiddish scholar. As a result of his outspoken criticism, Katz lost his job at Vilnius University, where he had taught for more than a decade.

"Imagine the absurdity," Katz tells *The Jerusalem Report*, "a museum on ground zero of the Holocaust dedicated to the topic of genocide and focusing entirely on Soviet crimes against the Lithuanian people that were horrendous but did not rise to genocide. In fact, the Lithuanian population grew during the period of Soviet misrule."

LITHUANIA'S DECEIT



The government in Vilnius has orchestrated a multi-pronged effort to whitewash Lithuania's crimes during the Holocaust

By Bernard Dichek *Vilnius*
Photos by Richard Schofield

By “ground zero of the Holocaust,” Katz is referring to the massive voluntary participation of the local Lithuanian population in the killing of Jews that led to the highest percentage of Jews killed in any major Jewish community in Europe – about 95 percent of the country’s population of over 200,000 Jews were murdered.

“THE LITHUANIAN Activist Front’s white-armed ‘rebels’ started murdering Jews in 40 locations or more before the arrival of the first German soldiers in June of 1941,” explains Katz.

He points out that omitting the Holocaust

from the museum altogether, or relegating it to a basement cubicle, is just one part of a multi-pronged government-led whitewashing effort.

Another tactic is to present members of the Hitler-allied Lithuanian Activist Front as patriotic heroes because they opposed the Soviets, while the Jews are portrayed as Communist accomplices. “The only depictions of Jews on the main floor of the museum are anti-Semitic cartoons from the 1950s showing Jews as Stalinist lackeys,” Katz notes.

In recent years, the government added another ploy, publicly launching “pre-trial investigations” into Holocaust survivors who

The Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius fantasizes a national history with a better and different past

fought with the Partisans against the Nazis and their Lithuanian allies. Among those placed on the prosecuting attorney’s wanted list for alleged war crimes was former Yad Vashem director Dr. Yitzhak Arad. In the end, the investigation was dropped but no formal apology was offered, and the link between Jews and war crimes has stayed in the minds of many Lithuanians – and in the Wikipedia entries of the accused.

When Katz heard that the Lithuanian state prosecutor was calling in elderly survivors for questioning, he was particularly incensed. “I spent more than 25 years interviewing Holocaust survivors for their Yiddish and life stories, and grew quite close to many of them,” he says. “So I felt a huge personal obligation to speak up.”

The research that Katz conducted among the survivors and the reason that drew him to relocate to Lithuania in 1999 was not directly connected to the Holocaust. Brooklyn-born Katz, 56, whose father was the Yiddish poet, Menke Katz (1906-1991) has spent a lifelong academic career as a philologist, studying the Litvak dialect of the Yiddish language. He gave up a teaching position at Yale in 1999 in order to live in close proximity to the Jews in the small towns of Lithuania and Belarus, who still spoke Yiddish like the generations



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before them. Before his Yale stint, he taught Yiddish at Oxford University for 18 years.

"They were the last of the Mohicans," says Katz, referring to the unadulterated way in which his Lithuanian interview subjects still spoke their *mame-loshn* (mother tongue), in contrast to the assimilated and dialect-combined forms spoken by emigrants elsewhere in the world.

Katz developed warm relationships with his interview subjects, and his Vilnius apartment is lined with weathered volumes of Jewish texts he received from the old-timers as gifts. "I wanted to talk to them about Yiddish

words, but the thing they most wanted to talk to me about was the betrayal of their Lithuanian neighbors," he recalls.

"When the war broke out, one reason they didn't run away was because they trusted their neighbors," Katz continues, noting that Lithuanians and Jews had lived side by side in relative harmony for more than 600 years.

"Yet the acts of barbarity they committed were sickening," he adds, recalling one survivor's description of a teenage girl being cut in half. He notes that the initiative Lithuanians showed in killing Jews early on in the war is considered by many historians to have led the Nazis to the conclusion that local populations in other countries could easily be motivated to "go beyond mere collaboration and form the volunteer backbone of the actual killing forces."

Katz's activism has made him a thorn in the side of organizations and individuals that he sees as belittling the Holocaust, both in Lithuania and elsewhere. He has written

numerous newspaper and academic articles, founded the website DefendingHistory.com, demonstrated against neo-Nazi marches in Vilnius (Vilna), Kaunas (Kovno) and the Latvian capital, Riga.

HE ENGAGED in a high-profile media debate with American historian Timothy Snyder about the danger of equating Nazi and Soviet crimes. In that debate, Katz criticizes Snyder's best-selling book, "Bloodlands," for drawing insufficiently nuanced comparisons between Stalin's persecution of Ukrainians, Poles and other ethnic groups with Hitler's determination to physically murder all the Jews in every territory his armies would occupy.

Katz contends that by implying any form of equality or moral equivalence between Nazi and Soviet crimes, Snyder plays into the hands of present-day anti-Semitic groups in Eastern Europe that try to rehabilitate the image of Nazi-aligned Lithuanian

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ultra-nationalists because they helped fight the Soviets, while Jews are demonized for ostensibly collaborating “as a people” with the Soviets. Katz also has conducted several successful lobbying efforts among European parliamentarians, including the thwarting of attempts to have “double genocide” language inserted into history textbooks used in schools.

In early 2012, Katz joined forces with Australian filmmaker Danny Ben-Moshe to co-author what became known as the Seventy Years Declaration. On the 70th anniversary of the formal adoption by the Nazi leadership of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem,” Katz and Ben-Moshe presented the president of the European Parliament with a document signed by dozens of European members of parliament from every major European country.

The document expresses the need for educating about the Holocaust and rejects “attempts to obfuscate the Holocaust by diminishing its uniqueness and deeming it to be equal, similar or equivalent to Communism.” Katz and Ben-Moshe’s campaign to get the signatures is chronicled in a film that Ben-Moshe directed and named “Rewriting History.” Ben-Moshe, whose grandparents emigrated to England from Lithuania in between the world wars, met Katz, along with several Lithuanian Holocaust survivors, while doing research into his family roots.

“When I met the survivors who were struggling to keep the story alive, and heard about how the government was creating an atmosphere of intimidation towards them, I wanted to lend a helping hand,” Ben-Moshe tells The Report.

A professor of political science at Melbourne’s Deakin University, Ben-Moshe adds that his own academic research has led him to observe that the idea of a Double Genocide, which dilutes the significance of the Holocaust, is a growing phenomenon in many other European countries, especially Hungary and the Baltic nations.

One of the survivors that Ben-Moshe met while doing his research was Fania Branstovskiy, a 90-year-old grandmother who was not only called in for questioning by the Lithuanian authorities, but was also described by a Vilnius-based newspaper, *Lietuvos Aidas*, as being a murderer and terrorist.

“I fought together with Abba Kovner,” Branstovskiy tells The Report, with a proud smile, referring to the legendary Lithuanian Jewish resistance leader and Hebrew poet. In the offices of the Vilnius Jewish Community



A plaque at Vilnius Museum of Genocide notes the crimes of the Gestapo and the KGB and fails to mention the slaughter of 95 percent of the Jews of Lithuania

Center where she continues to work, Branstovskiy describes how she managed to escape through a hole in the wall of the Vilna ghetto, as Lithuanian police transferred Jews to the woods of Ponary, where mass executions took place in open pits.

RESPONDING TO the allegations that she committed crimes against Lithuanians, she strongly denies that she and her fellow partisan fighters ever targeted civilians of any kind. “We fought together with the Soviet partisans because it was war. We were fighting the Nazis not the local people,” she explains.

She adds that she was especially surprised to see how the mood has changed in recent years, noting that a previous Lithuanian prime minister and former president, Algirdas Brazauskas, had given her awards and birthday greetings “for her heroic contributions to Lithuania’s freedom.”

Branstovskiy’s congratulatory notes are not the only contradictory messages that Lithuanian political leaders have conveyed over the years. Indeed, during a 1994 visit to Israel, Lithuanian Prime Minister Adolfas Sleivicius apologized for the collaboration by some Lithuanians with the Nazis.

The Lithuanian government was also one of the sponsors of the Lithuanian Holocaust Atlas published by the Vilna Gaon State

Jewish Museum in 2011. The 300-plus-page book contains comprehensive information and photos about the murder sites of 190 Lithuanian *shtetls*. “We were able to provide eye-witness descriptions about the killings because we had access to tapes recorded by the KGB interrogators of Nazi prisoners who were the perpetrators,” explains Milda Jakulyte-Vasil, the bold editor of the Atlas, who is not Jewish. She is widely acknowledged by the Jewish community to be one of the few truth-tellers in an influential position.

Jakulyte-Vasil, a historian and museum specialist in her thirties, acknowledges that the Holocaust isn’t something that people of her grandparents’ generation like to speak about. “The Holocaust isn’t taught in Lithuanian schools,” she tells The Report, adding with a knowing look, “but there’s quite a bit about the Communist persecution.”

Despite the concerns about the distorted image of Jews that is being promulgated in Lithuania today, there have been virtually no acts of physical violence against the country’s Jewish community, which numbers around 3,000. There is also ample evidence of Lithuanian efforts to cultivate business ties with Israel, including a government-sponsored initiative that brought more than a hundred members of Israel’s science and business community to Vilnius in September.

Why then be concerned?

“Because if you keep allowing neo-Nazi parades in city centers on major holidays yelling *Juden raus* or *Lietuva Lietuviams* (Lithuania for Lithuanians), it is only a matter of time before one of them will do something stupid,” says Katz, who points out that there is something more at stake than just the imminent risk of physical harm.

“The truth of history is not for sale,” he says. “The Jewish partisans who helped fight the Nazis are heroes of the free world. The fascist butchers of their Jewish civilian countrymen are war criminals no matter how ‘anti-Soviet’ they were. The new virulent strain of Holocaust denial coming out of the east that takes the Holocaust out of history, without denying a single death, must be brought down now, before it is established history in the new Europe.”

Asked how it is that the informal protest movement that he heads remains a small one, Katz remains unperturbed. “The tiny group of us that saw all this coming can feel darned proud. We are, in our own little way, ahead of our time.

“And for us Litvaks,” he adds with a wry smile, “small was always beautiful.” ■