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My lost Lithuanian home:

An autobiographical essay on belonging and not belonging

Robin Cohen

Abstract

'Home' is often thought of as the place where one belongs. However, what if one wants to belong somewhere, but a great weight of painful history has separated you from your old home? In this paper, the author interleaves the history of his family in Lithuania with the momentous events that occurred there, especially during the Second World War. The invasion of the country by the Nazis, the horrific massacre of the Lithuanian Jews and the occupation of the country by the Soviet Union, punctuate the stories of emigration, destruction and the attempt to build a free independent country. There are some heroes in this narrative and quite a few villains, including a prominent Lithuanian whose misdeeds have been excruciatingly exposed by his granddaughter in a new biography. Those who stood by are depicted in an unusually sympathetic way. The author concludes that Lithuanians will have to face up to the unsavoury parts of their past to create a wholesome future.

Introduction

In 2020, I was asked to make a short autobiographical contribution on the theme of 'diaspora and home' by the editors of a noteworthy book titled *Thinking Home on the Move*[1]. I found the collection engaging mainly because I learnt so much more about my colleagues' backgrounds than I had garnered from our prior casual meetings. However, on rereading my own contribution, I noticed it was curiously insufficient. I had explained that I was born in South Africa to a Lithuanian father and a mother born in South Africa to Polish parents. My family was not deeply rooted in the country and I had left aged 20, so despite my engagement in anti-apartheid politics, my continuing connections with the country and my love for my younger brother and his family who live there, I reluctantly concluded that if I was pressed into a binary choice, it is far more accurate to nominate the UK as home, the country where I have spent most of my life with a loving family, and many close colleagues and friends.

I am a scholar of diasporas, so I am used to writing about people with a variety of origins, many of whom had undertaken multiple journeys to reach a number of destinations. However, when I applied this insight to my own case, two glaring omissions stood out. Why should I nominate only one home? South Africa still retained some elements of home and why had I not even thought of Israel or Lithuania as other homes? Under the 'law of return', Israel permits those of Jewish origin to claim entry, residence and citizenship. I am Jewish by descent on both sides and, while I am happy to claim this heritage identity, I am not the least bit religious and have married a fellow atheist of a different heritage. If my lack of religion somewhat diluted my Jewish claims, I could counter that by recalling that in my early teens I had belonged to a Zionist socialist movement and, like many others, had spent a month or so on a kibbutz. This link to Zionism is 60 years in my past but what has remained is a profound disagreement with others on the left who proclaim that Israel should not exist. How else were the pathetic remnants of European Jewry, who were turned away by so many countries, to be saved after the Second World War? Despite my acceptance of the need for a Jewish state, my initial and subsequent visits to Israel convinced me that the treatment of the Palestinians by successive Israeli governments is unconscionable. Past victimhood, however horrific, is not a licence to effect injustice and oppression, or to annex other peoples' land. I much prefer the open-mindedness, cultural imagination and sense of humour of diasporic Jews to the rather harsh, uncompromising certainty of those who currently dominate the political arena in Israel. Assuming that I have, and will continue to have, a free choice, I conclude that Israel, as currently governed, is decidedly not my chosen home.

1 Robin Cohen 'Diaspora and home'. In Paolo Boccagni, Luis Eduardo Pérez Murcia and Milena Belloni (eds) *Thinking Home on the Move: A Conversation Across Disciplines*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2020, pp. 71–4.

Enter Lithuania

How about Lithuania? Frankly, the country did not loom large in my youth and adolescence – even aged 18 I would have been hard put to find it instantly on a map. My father, uncles, aunts and their friends – most of whom came from Lithuania – kept *schtum* (a Yiddish word, meaning silent, but with the definite sense of meaningfully silent). Something had happened there, but they were not going to tell us exactly what. The 'what' crept up slowly on the children of the South African Litvaks (as Lithuanian Jews are called). What we didn't know then still has the capacity to shock. Within three years of the occupation of the country by the Nazis, 91–95 per cent of Lithuania's 200,000 Jews had been murdered – the highest death rate in any European country, including Germany.

It was quite a few years later when the jigsaw pieces of my own family's history in Lithuania began to fit together. My father and five of his siblings had left a long while before the mass murders. One had gone to the USA. My father, his three brothers and his sister had emigrated to South Africa where they had led happy lives, except when the spectre of those left behind in Lithuania loomed large. The prelude to that story can be glimpsed in the photo below, which I have examined many times, trying to read the subtext beneath the image. The dominant figure is my grandfather, a bearded patriarch, sometime Talmudic scholar and owner of a struggling 'fancy goods' shop. He is affectionate with my two little cousins – though my father hinted that that was not his normal wont. In subordinate position 1 is my grandmother squinting to avoid the camera or, perhaps, reacting to a rare burst of sunshine. Barely visible at the edge of the wooden fence in subordinate position 2 is my aunt Gita. She was the youngest in the family and probably had been 'volunteered' to look after the old folk rather than joining her emigrant siblings. My grandfather died of natural causes in 1931. However, all the remaining people in the photo with the rest of the family and all the Jews of our little town, Viekšniai, were rounded up in July and August 1941 and shot into mass graves in the woods near Mažeikiai.[2]

2 An account is provided here https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania2/lit2_00309.html For simplicity, I've used Lithuanian Samogitian spelling for towns (rather than the Yiddish, Russian or Polish variants).

Figure 1: Family photo in Viekšniai, 1920s

Lithuania and its Jews

The Jewish presence in Lithuania, which dates at least from the fourteenth century, has had its ups and downs. The downs included expulsion (1495–1503) and discriminatory legislation in 1566 but, on the whole, the community was protected by royal charters and allowed to develop an autonomous cultural and religious life. Seen over a span of seven centuries of settlement, what happened in the Second World War was anomalous. Given the stunning finality of the murder of virtually the whole Jewish population, it is perhaps understandable that we suppressed the tenuous threads of memory that connected our family to Lithuania – a sort of collective amnesia overcame us. However, the nagging question of why exactly the massacres had occurred lingered.

There is an easy answer, which is both the casual and the official explanation for the Lithuanian Holocaust. In the interwar years, following an Act of Independence on 16 February 1918 until 1940, the Lithuanian national project was built around a framework of liberal democracy and, consequently, nothing of significance happened to the Jews during that period. Indeed, as official accounts insist, Jews were accorded full political rights in the 1922 Constitution and were represented in the *Seimas* (the legislature). All this was to change in 1940. Under the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union occupied the Lithuanian Republic in June of that year and, when the pact was terminated one year later, in June 1941, the Germans invaded Lithuania. What

happened subsequently, so the official account runs, was all the fault of the wicked Nazis.

This is a convenient narrative but it elides some important background. The German minority living in the port city of Klaipėda felt their cultural and language rights undermined by the Lithuanian Republic and provided ready fodder and an attentive audience for Nazi propaganda. Hitler himself had brazenly toured the city in 1939, reaching it from the heavily-armed cruiser *Deutschland* and intimidating the Lithuanian government into ceding the city to German control. Fascist movements also had a considerable following in Lithuania. Particularly notable was the Iron Wolf, active in 1928–1930 and led by Prime Minister Augustinas Voldemaras, whose imprimatur gave the movement a semi-recognized status. In reading about the movement I was struck by one of its proposals – creating a separate bathing area for Jews at the seaside, a chilling anticipation of one of the more distasteful policies applied to blacks in apartheid South Africa. Nor should we forget the activities of Petras Kubiliūnas, Chief of the Lithuanian General Staff in 1929–1934 who, with the support of Voldemaras, staged a failed coup in June 1934. Though he received a death sentence for this blatant act of treason, Kubiliūnas's sentence was commuted in 1937 and he was released from prison. He surfaced again as an open collaborator with the Nazis during 1941–1944, where he held a official position in the Generalbezirk Litauen. (He was executed in Moscow in 1946 as a war criminal.)

This short description of the prelude to the massacres is sufficient to establish that there was likely to be a section of the population, including those close to power, that welcomed the Nazis and shared their hatred of Jews. So it proved. The invading Germans numbered around 1000, many of whom were engaged in administrative tasks, guard duty and military manoeuvres. There was simply an insufficient number of Nazis around to have done all that killing on their own. Some tried their very best. Most notorious was a maniacal Jew-killer SS-Obersturmführer Joachim Hamann, who set up a 'mobile detachment' based in Kaunas, to hunt down and slaughter Jews. There were many local members in his detachment (in a ratio of five locals to one German), including former members of the Lithuanian army. The extent of enthusiastic engagement of certain ethnic Lithuanians in the killings is well documented.[3]

In July 1941, prompted by the arrival of a German squad, the local headmaster in Viekšniai put himself in charge of imprisoning the Jewish men, using them for hard labour and engaging in acts of humiliation and terror accompanied by the taunts of the non-Jewish population. Our family, together with other townsfolk and fellow Jews in the area were transported to the woods near Mažeikiai at the end of the month. Witness accounts indicate that Germans executed the men on the first day. Over the subsequent three days, the women and children were shot by locals whose nerve was

3 See the summary blog post and extensive references in Thames Darwin 'Lithuanian Coup of 1941', 2017. https://inevitablehistoricity.blogspot.com/2017/06/lithuanian-coup-of-1941.html . Also, Mary Fulbrook, *Reckoning: Legacies of Nazi persecution and the quest for justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 105–6; 420–1.

strengthened by people bringing them food, vodka and beer.[4] Some children were tossed in live. After their gruesome task was completed, the killers returned to Mažeikiai for a festive meal. On public health grounds, the municipal authorities supplied the lime to disinfect the corpses – the white streaks that remained on the ground later identified the sites as mass graves.

The Polonsky intervention

For Litvaks abroad who were forced to abandon their families to their grisly fate, the case was proven and there was nothing more to say other than that the Nazis were monsters, 'the Lithuanians', not much better. However, the expression 'the Lithuanians' was always too capacious a category and it included, I must insist, Jewish Lithuanians. (At the heart of the issue of belonging or non-belonging is the all too tempting habit of separating the categories 'Lithuanian' and 'Jew'.) Yad Vashem, the memorial centre set up in Israel, has recognized 916 ethnic Lithuanians as 'Righteous Among the Nations', a much-deserved form of acknowledgement to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Not that it's a competition, but Lithuania's population was 2.58 million in 1939, compared with Germany's 86.76 million, among whom there were fewer people (638) given the 'Righteous' title.

I want to turn now to what I have called 'the Polonsky intervention'. This refers to the work of Antony Polonsky with whom, as it happens, I have something in common. Like me, he was born in Johannesburg to Litvak parents and attended the same university (Witwatersrand), where we studied similar subjects. I didn't know him, but I had heard at university that he was expected, in the language of the day, 'to go far'. Unlike me, he had retained or acquired an interest in his roots. Learning Polish later, he became the world's foremost scholar of Polish–Jewish history, a reputation richly earned by his editorship of *Polin*, a periodical on Polish–Jewish relations, and his 2000-page magnum opus, three volumes on the history of Jews in Poland and Russia.[5] Don't be misled by the omission of Lithuania in the titles of his books. The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1791) conjoined the two countries while the debate I am about to enunciate started, and continues, in parallel in both contemporary Lithuania and Poland.

There are three aspects of his intervention I wish to cover here. First, Polonsky challenges the trichotomy used by Holocaust scholars – victims, perpetrators and

4 See 'The Mass Murder of the Jews of Mažeikiai and Surrounding Areas' Holocaust Atlas of Lithuania, http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a_atlas/search//page/1/item/80/ ; V. Brandišauskas, 'Mažeikių apskrities žydų likimas Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais' *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, (Vilnius) 2 (20), 2006. pp. 7–30; and https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania6/lit6_398.html .

5 Antony B. Polonsky *The Jews in Poland and Russia, Volume 1: 1350-1881* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009) *The Jews in Poland and Russia, Volume 2: 1881-1914* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009) and *The Jews in Poland and Russia, Volume 3: 1914-2008* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

bystanders – with special contempt being reserved for the 'bystanders' in this conventional division. How could they have looked on and done nothing, so the argument goes? In fact, not all Lithuanians looked on, as I've indicated. I'm also with Polonsky in saying that the threat posed to someone who was inclined to intervene, and to their families and communities, needs to be honestly assessed before we shake our heads in despair at the immoral bystander. Again, as Mary Fulbrook has argued, bystander behaviour varies along a spectrum, ranging from active intervention to protect victims to participatory complicity.[6] I add that, through the work of social psychologists, we now have a much more sophisticated understanding of when and why people get involved and why they do not.[7]

Bystander Responses				
1	2	3	4	5
Active intervention on behalf of victims	Demonstrative sympathy for victims	"Neutral": Inactive, impassive eyewitnesses	Demonstrative support for acts of perpe-tration	Participatory complicity: active on the side of perpe-trators

Figure 2: Mary Fulbrook's spectrum of bystander responses in Nazi Germany

Second, I also concur with Polonsky in arguing that the rich culture created by the Jews of Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, Russia and Lithuania in the pre-war period is undervalued by Jews and non-Jews, by Israelis and those in the Jewish diaspora.[8] Their achievements should be a source of inspiration and (perhaps more controversially, but I have no problem with it) the return of Jewish life to these areas should be actively encouraged.

Part three of Polonsky's intervention is the tough one. He is seen as lending his considerable authority to the theory of 'the double genocide', widely discussed in government and intellectual circles in Poland and Lithuania. Crudely, the argument is that Jews were treated like shit by the Nazis but we, the non-Jews of Poland and Lithuania (usually abbreviated to 'Poles' and 'Lithuanians') were treated like shit by the Soviets. In Lithuania, so the reasoning continues, the Soviet occupations of 1940–41 and 1944–1991 were as bloody and genocidal as the three-year occupation by the Nazis. In some variations, it is conceded that some of 'us' collaborated with the Nazis, but then, some Jews collaborated with the Soviets. There is a definite implication here of moral equivalence, and even more unacceptably, some hint at a transactional deal –

6 Mary Fulbrook 'Social relations and bystander responses to violence: Kristallnacht, November 1938'. In Wolf Gruner and Steven J. Ross (eds.) *New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019, p. 70.
7 See, for example, P. DeScioli, and R Kurzban 'Mysteries of morality', *Cognition*, 112(2), 2009, pp. 281–299. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2009.05.008
8 Anthony Polonsky 'Writing the history of the Jews of Poland and Russia', *European Judaism: a Journal for the New Europe*, 46 (2) 2013, pp. 4–11.

we will recognize your Holocaust and our complicity if you recognize our oppression/genocide and your complicity. I must immediately make clear that the idea that Antony Polonsky authored or explicitly endorsed the theory of the double genocide is wide off the mark, but his words were so interpreted and, accordingly, denounced in the angriest of terms.[9] Here, for example, is part of a transcript of a talk he gave at the US Holocaust Museum in 2008.

For the Poles, the Lithuanians, Latvians, the Ukrainians, they were faced with two enemies, or faced with how to choose between them. The Jews were in a different position. For the Jews, the Nazis were unequivocally enemies, whose goal was to destroy physically Jews in Eastern Europe. Soviets were potential allies. So we're talking about a very complicated situation in which two totalitarian systems are in conflict, and in which a lot of innocent people on all sides are suffering.[10]

Polonsky's detractors were incensed both by these words, which they saw as equivocations, and at his evident pleasure at accepting a Lithuanian honour, the 'Cross of Officer for Merits to Lithuania'. Pinned on his chest by Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė, the press release included suitably vague accolades to his research into the history of Lithuanian–Polish–Jewish relations and his promotion of the work by Lithuanian scholars, which, the release continues, shows how 'Lithuania is open to a dialogue on the most painful issues of its past' (see photo below).

Figure 3: Professor Antony Polonsky and President Dalia Grybauskaitė

9 https://defendinghistory.com/antony-polonsky-returns-to-brandeis-with-lithuanian-presidents-cross-of-the-officer-of-the-order-for-helping-the-baltic-states-holocaust-pr-campaign-in-the-west/29890
10 Anthony Polonsky. Transcript of Podcast, 2008.
https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/podcast/voices-on-antisemitism/antony-polonsky

Litvak life in the interwar period

Without Antony Polonsky's deep understanding of the dynamics at play, I nonetheless tried to get to grips with some of the complex choices facing the Litvaks in the interwar period. One of the most common and corny adages of Jewish diasporic life is 'two Jews, three opinions', which seems to have applied in spades in interwar Lithuania. Here are the most important lines of fracture:

The Bundists. These were the followers of General Jewish Labour Bund, which operated in Lithuania, Poland and Russia. Broadly, they were social democrats and Mensheviks, but after the Russian revolution, the Bund was dissolved and those (a minority), who were prepared to entertain more violent revolutionary means, joined the Lithuanian Communist Party. My father said he could remember a little group of young men in Viekšniai whispering to each other, whom he took to be communists, but he was uncertain and he was certain there were no Bundists or communists in the family.

The Zionists. Like the Bundists, the Zionists were secular. They spoke Hebrew – which they liberated from the synagogue, and wanted to emigrate to Palestine to build settlements there. In line with the 'two Jews, three opinions' proverb, one author wryly remarks of the Zionists: 'As a result of differences of ideology and tactical approach to social problems this camp divided off into many parties, movements and organizations.'[11] The hardliner, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, from whom one can trace the militarist tendencies all too characteristic of Israeli politics, visited Lithuania in 1925 and gained a modicum of support among the Zionists. Again, our family in Lithuania was not involved, but the different factions of the Lithuanian Zionists were reproduced in the formation of four of the South African Jewish youth movements – Dror, Betar, Bnei Akiva and Hashomer Hatzair.[12]

The Frum. Frum is Yiddish for 'pious' or 'observant'. This was my grandfather's bent. Members of this group spoke Yiddish for everyday interactions, reserving Hebrew only for sacred purposes. The great hero of the *frum* was Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, known at the Vilna Gaon (The Sage of Vilnius). Possessed of an eidetic memory, he is said to have memorized the Hebrew bible by the age of four. My father was dismissive of my grandfather's religiosity, declaring that he was so buried in the Talmud that he forgot that he had a large family to feed and clothe.

The Autonomists. Though small in number, there were of number of Litvaks who identified fully with the Lithuanian National Awakening (*Lietuvių tautinis atgimimas*), which aspired to free Lithuania from Russian and Polish domination and create an independent state. One of the most notable was the linguist, Chackelis Lemchenas

11 https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_lita/lit_00062.html

12 It will be going too far off piste to comment on these youth movements, but Wiki can be consulted for short descriptions. I only add that it was a pity that Hashomer Hatzair did not gain more adherents as its founding principles declared that any Jewish settlements in Palestine should respect Arab property and land rights. If only. I was in a fifth movement, Habonim, a heady brew of *Wandervogel*, Baden-Powell, Karl Marx and Theodor Herzl, concocted in the UK and exported to South Africa.

(1904–2001), who helped to standardize the Lithuanian language.[13] However, many Litvaks were attracted to the idea of cultural and religious autonomy *within* the emerging Lithuanian state. This was not a ridiculous idea – indeed, the ethnic Lithuanian intelligentsia wanted to foster a thriving Jewish culture as a useful counterweight to Russian and German influences, which they saw as far too dominant.[14] Moreover, they often regarded the snooty Polonized aristocracy as more obnoxious than the Jews.

The Emigrants. The lure of foreign lands was what motivated my father and his siblings. They thought the Zionists were chasing a chimera, the Bundists were dreamers and the *Frum* were deluded. I'm not sure what they thought of the Autonomists – probably that it was all happening above their heads among the Vilnius intelligentsia. For the emigrants, the questions were more practical. How much would it cost? Where should they go? Like many migrants they looked to a rosier future, but my lot seemed to have left their pasts behind with a minimum of nostalgia or regret. A favourite story illustrating this concerns my uncle Hirsch, who immediately changed his name to Harry and disdainfully tossed the *tefillim* (phylacteries), ceremonially given to him by my grandfather, into the Baltic Sea.[15]

In reading about how the ethnic Lithuanian population reacted to the Lithuanian Jews, it was clear where the particular pinch point was. Generalized anti-Semitism – the Jews were all greedy capitalists, they were all revolutionary communists, even the nonsense that they killed Christian children to make Passover bread (the blood libel) – all were present in the interwar period, but not in an unusual or life-threatening measure. Many of the intelligentsia liked Jews, most interactions were peaceable and if the Zionists and Emigrants wanted to leave, so be it. What riled the majority population were the Jews who supported the Lithuanian Communist Party and who greeted the Red Army in the streets of Vilnius in July 1940. The republic was crushed and 'the Jews' (seen collectively) were seen as unpatriotic traitors, not true Lithuanians.

13 An extraordinary linguist, he compiled the Russian-Lithuanian dictionary, survived Dachau to return to his beloved Vilnius and died at a ripe old age of 96. Described as 'criminally underrated', but not perhaps a page-turner, was his *Lietuvių kalbos įtaka Lietuvos žydų tarmei* (1970) (The influence of the Lithuanian language on the Lithuanian Jewish dialect).

14 Samuel Gringauz 'Jewish national autonomy in Lithuania, 1918–25', *Jewish Social Studies*, 14 (3) 1952, pp. 225–46. I add that such a proposition was not all that unusual. The millet system in the Ottoman Empire gave considerable autonomy to minorities, while the Habsburg Empire was famous for its multinational and diverse character. Exclusive ethno-nationalism as the basis for self-determination was a relatively recent invention and was pushed hard by Woodrow Wilson at the Versailles conference in 1919, just as modern Lithuania was born.

15 For those who need an explanation, *tefillim* are particularly strange religious objects used by the *frum* at their daily prayers. Minute scrolls from the Torah are encased in a little box made from animal skin. One part goes around the head, another, made of leather straps, is wound around the forearm. *Tefillim* are generally transported in an embroidered velvet bag, no doubt available at a discount at my grandfather's fancy goods shop.

Our family reconnects to Lithuania

The awareness of our family's deep Lithuanian roots arose slowly. Harry (of *tefillim* fame) was married to a Colman and new information was provided by her relative, Andrew Colman, a professor of psychology at the University of Leicester and someone my wife and I knew well. In researching his own family roots, Andrew and my cousin's son, Jonathan Edelstein, found out the birthdates and the birthplace of my great-great grandparents, my grandparents and my father, Sie (Shaya) Cohen (1908). As far back as records began, my father's family were all in Viekšniai! Another straw in the wind was reading Dan Jacobson's journey to Lithuania in *Herschel's Kingdom* (1968). My wife and I independently knew Dan, a Litvak South African writer based in London, who provided a moving account of a visit to his family's home in Varniai, about an hour south of Viekšniai. At that time, the local Jewish community was very thin on the ground and guides to accompany one on a journey to the past were difficult to come by. We were much amused by Dan squaring up to an American Litvak who pushed ahead in the queue. 'What makes your business with your grandfather more important than my business with my grandfather?', exclaimed Dan, usually the mildest of men.

I was going to have to do the trip to my Lithuanian 'home', but somehow it didn't happen for a long time. Meanwhile, my younger brother's son, Douglas, visited as did my older brother's daughter, Judith Suissa, and my cousin's daughter, Sue Edelstein. All came back with valuable nuggets of information and some painful experiences to report. Finally, I had no excuse. On his sabbatical to Oxford, I met Professor Vytis Čubrinskas, an anthropologist at Vytautas Magnus University, and we found we shared many interests, including work on diasporas. When his invitation to come to a conference in Kaunas arrived I accepted with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. The details of the conference need not detain us here but, of course, I planned a car journey with my wife to Viekšniai and Mažeikiai.

I met two ethnic Lithuanians at the conference whose job it was to promote and preserve Litvak heritage sites (more of that later). Vytus also offered the services of two of his students who would act as guides and translators, but I immediately felt that would be a disaster. The students were much too eager and I hated the thought of becoming an anthropological subject, with notes being taken of my reactions to the sites we were visiting. I won't dwell on the visit. I simply record that it provided a meaningful and emotional connection with Viekšniai and my vanished family, but so keen was I to get out of town that I unwittingly triggered a speed trap, only to find a ticket from the local Lithuanian traffic department on my return to Oxford. That seemed bizarre, but I paid up, somewhat in admiration of the Lithuanian bureaucrat who tracked me down. (I phoned her to say 'hello' and to check how I should make the payment.)

There the matter lay, until my younger brother, Clive, who lives in Johannesburg, decided to apply for Lithuanian citizenship. I urged him on, thinking I could apply in his wake. In the meantime, I began to imagine myself running my fingers over my *pasas* (passport) bearing the image of a knight in shining armour, the symbol of Lithuania first

adopted by Grand Duke Vytautas the Great. He was the very same ruler who encouraged Jews (strictly they were Karaimes or Karaites, a sub-group of Jews) to settle in various towns and, in 1388, issued a remarkably open-minded charter protecting their lives and property, allowing unrestricted mobility, and permitting Jews to engage in trade and financial activities.[16] Buoyed by the prospect of getting closer to Lithuania, I started language instruction in Lithuanian on the Internet. I can also recall going to an exhibition at the Tate Britain mainly because I wanted to pass by the Lithuanian Embassy in Bessborough Gardens, London. I imagined shaking hands there with the under, under secretary as she handed me my Lithuanian passport. '*Sveikinu'* (congratulations), she said, with a charming smile on her face.

In my dreams. Sadly, as the months went by, the prospects of such an encounter dimmed. Perhaps there were too many applications from émigré Litvaks. Perhaps our lawyer was not up to scratch. Perhaps, the requirements have changed, as our lawyer now claimed. *That* sounded disheartening. So near and yet so far.

From erasure to folkloric commemoration

Our faltering attempts to reconnect with our Lithuanian home led me to further reflections on Lithuania's post-1990 relationship with its Jews. This I would describe as a movement from erasure to folkloric commemoration. 'Erasure' is close to the more-commonly used word 'denial', but better captures the position of Lithuania's ruling class. As a son of a Lithuanian I should start by congratulating all Lithuanians for being the first country in the Soviet bloc to reclaim its independence and to throw off what many Lithuanians saw as the yoke of Soviet domination. It was a brave collective act to declare unilaterally the restoration of Lithuania's independence against the wishes of the Soviet Union and to stick with it despite enduring a 74-day blockade. Many Lithuanians had not accepted Soviet domination passively and persistent acts of resistance took place, notably a guerrilla war waged in the Lithuanian forests (1944–53) and the self-immolation of a 19-year old high school student, Romas Kalanta, in 1972. The suppression of the partisans undertaking guerrilla war in rural Lithuania and the deportation of more that 200,000 ethnic Lithuanians to the Gulags or to Siberia (where about 50,000 died) are the basis for the assertion that a 'double genocide' had occurred in Lithuania although, as I understand it, there are still legal complexities to be resolved around whether the definition of genocide applies in this case.[17]

The preoccupations of creating a post-Soviet state, joining NATO and the EU, and dealing with the aftermath of Soviet repression meant that the historical injustices meted out to the Jews were largely forgotten, effectively obliterated, for nearly two

16 See http://litvakai.mch.mii.lt/the_past/privilege.htm and Stefan Gąsiorowski 'The general privileges granted by Polish kings to the Lithuanian Karaimes in the 16th–18th centuries'. *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia*, Vol. 2. Kraków, 2003. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/250298938.pdf
17 Justinas Žilinskas 'Drėlingas v. Lithuania (ECHR): Ethno-political genocide confirmed?' 2019. https://www.ejiltalk.org/drelingas-v-lithuania-echr-ethno-political-genocide-confirmed/

decades. This erasure lasted at least until 2007. I focus on that date as it came to my attention in that year in my interactions with a Lithuanian graduate student in the UK. She was sensitive, intelligent and exceptionally well-educated. However, when I revealed my Lithuanian ancestry and made some anodyne remark about how sad it was that it had all gone so badly for the Jews, she looked at me with genuine perplexity. It turned out that during the course of her school and university education, and in her interactions with her parents, she had simply not heard that there were any Lithuanian Jews, let alone what had happened to them. I emphasize this was a sophisticated student with an impeccable educational record.

The movement away from erasure took a particular form – linked to the increased interest in their roots on the part of the Litvak diaspora and the opening up of tourism in Lithuania. Heritage tourism was all the rage. Here's a wooden synagogue. There's a plaque where a famous Litvak lived. Behold some cemetery gates, a Jewish hospital, an art school, a Yeshiva, a bank, a nursing home (all now repurposed or in ruins). That I was on the right track regarding the timing of the move from erasure to recognition was confirmed in the narrative accompanying the brochure on 'The Litvak Landscape' (see illustration) that was handed to me in Kaunas in 2017, and which read in part:

Due to various circumstances, both local and global, it's only now that we are starting to finally assemble the puzzle that was left after the Second World War and the Holocaust and then frozen by the Soviet occupation of the country. It took a couple of decades following the restoration of our independence to accept the history and to once again remind ourselves it cannot be repeated.

Figure 4: Brochure celebrating the Litvaks of Kaunas, issued by the local tourist board.

A large part of the Litvak recognition project, both in Kaunas and nationally, takes the form of saluting the achievement of famous Litvaks. In Kaunas, these include the French Litvak, *Emmanuel Levinas* (an eminent moral philosopher) and the US Litvak, *Emma Goldman* (the anarchist and feminist), whose image appears on the right of the 'Kaunastic' brochure. The national list provided by Jewish Heritage Lithuania includes, unsurprisingly, the US Litvak *Jasha Heifec*, a violinist who combines spectacular technique and controlled emotion so flawlessly that it is difficult to stop misting over. The cubist artist and French Litvak, *Jacques Lipchitz* is there, as is *Aaron Klug,* who was knighted, won a Nobel prize in chemistry and was president of Britain's Royal Society, the UK's most prestigious scientific body. (Though I am several millions miles away from the Nobel prize, I share his South African upbringing and education at the University of the Witwatersrand.)

Adding up the 'famous Litvaks' on both lists produces 45 names and a clear pattern – scientists, artists, doctors and musicians are lauded, as are famous rabbis, the first Hebrew novelist and others who made cultural contributions, largely within the Jewish community. From this selection emerges a folkloric portrait – the social construction of a distinctive Litvak tradition. Here and there, the crossovers to ethnic Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, German and other cultures are recognized, as in the case of the creator of Esperanto, but this is infrequent. There is also one telling omission, *Joe Slovo*, a South African Litvak born in Obeliai (three hours east of Viekšniai, my point of

reference in all matters Lithuanian) and probably the most famous white anti-apartheid activist, who became Minister of Housing in the post-apartheid government. He was also, note, general secretary of the South African Communist Party, which worked closely with Moscow.[18] Recognizing famous Litvaks is all very well, but it seems that they are cast out of the charmed circle if they were communists.

Litvaks in the post-Soviet period

The move from erasure to folkloric commemoration was, of course, progress. Instead of cemeteries being ploughed over and historic wooden synagogues being used for firewood, they were preserved and acted as loci for consciousness-raising for locals and visitors alike. Remembering is better than forgetting, recognition is better than denial. There are a significant number of ethnic Lithuanians (including civil servants in the Ministry of Culture) who have worked productively with the surviving Jewish community to regenerate the sense of a Litvak past and a precarious, but dogged, possibility of a Litvak future in their homeland. As usual, Jewish life in post-Soviet Lithuania has splintered, as it did before the war. The secular Jewish school in Vilnius uses Lithuanian as the medium of instruction, while the religious school uses Russian and Lithuanian (with attention, of course, to Hebrew).[19] There are a number of notable works on Lithuanian Jewish history and the current situation facing Litvaks, but the intellectual heart of the community pivots around Dov Levin and Dovid Katz, 'the two Davids' as I shall dub them.

Dov Levin (1925–2016) escaped the Kaunas ghetto where his family perished, joined the Litvak partisans to fight the Nazis and, in 1945, walked (repeat walked) 4,260 kilometres to Palestine. He became a prolific and distinguished professor of history at the Hebrew University and author of 520 articles and 16 books, nearly all about the Jews of the Baltic states, especially Lithuania. Dovid Katz (1956–), is a prominent Yiddishist, born in Brooklyn and based at Vilnius University, where he has produced a stream of works including accessible short stories and primers in Yiddish, in addition to many works on Yiddish grammar and orthography. He also is the founder and avid contributor to the no-holds-barred web journal on Litvak history, *Defending History*, which (in May 2021) had produced 4282 issues. If only the volume of words generated by the two Davids could act like the legendary biblical slingshot to reverse the Goliathan course of history!

18 I would like to add Ruth First, Joe's wife, to the list, but regrettably her parents were Latvians, not Lithuanians. I was told this good story about Joe. He liked to play Klaberjass, a card game to which Litvaks are addicted. Playing amiably with his South African relatives, who were staunch capitalists, he was teased: 'Joe, let us know what date you are starting the revolution, we'd like to sell our shares'. An incisive account of the distinctive attributes of the South African Litvak game is provided by Beth Pollack, 'In the cards', 2021, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/in-the-cards-klaberjass

19 During the Soviet occupation, Russian was adopted by the surviving Jewish population, numbered at 9000 in 1990. Yiddish has been nearly lost, being spoken by only 10 per cent of the population, mainly the elderly. The Litvak population is now around 3000; many have emigrated to Israel.

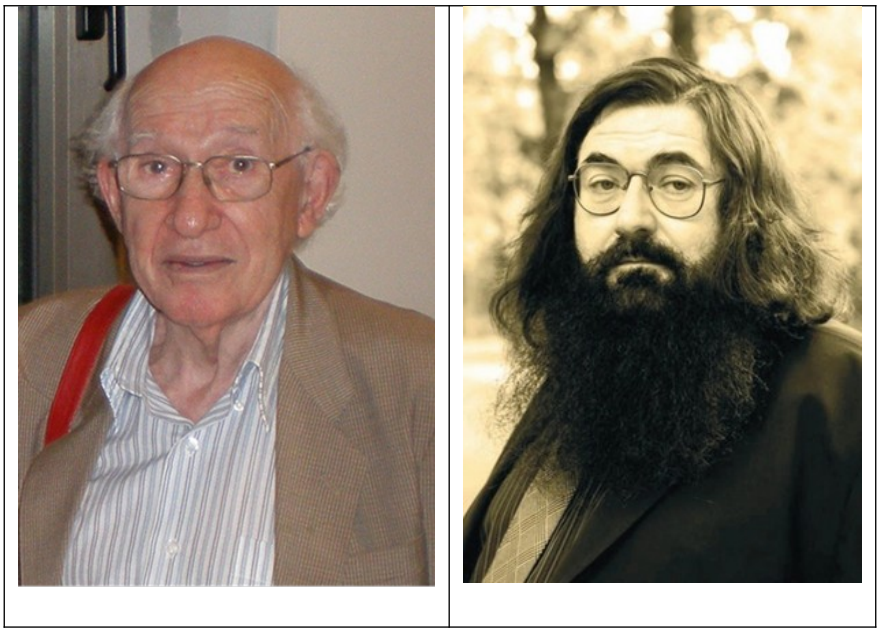

Figure 5: Dov Levin (left) and Dovid Katz (right, photo by Ida Olniansky)

Although coming from different Litvak traditions, until Dov's death 2016 the two Davids were united in their fierce opposition to the theory of the double genocide, which they have denounced frequently and in many different ways. For example, they are two of the signatories of the 2011 declaration *Litvaks and their Descendants Issue Public Letter Calling for Change in Lithuanian Government's Holocaust Policies*.[20] For them, the official Lithuanian government approach to the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the killings was 'consistent with the anti-historical double genocide campaign which distorts, obfuscates and undermines the Holocaust and negates the lessons of history of both the Nazi and Communist eras by a double-gamed process of commemorating victims as well as their killers, who are being sanitized and glorified as "anti-Soviet patriots"'. They were particularly enraged by the referral to the state prosecutor of Yitzhak Arad, Sara Ginaite, Fania Brantsovsky and Rachel Margolis, all survivors of the Lithuanian Holocaust, and all of whom fought with anti-Nazi partisans in Lithuania. The basis for this referral was that in Arad's autobiography he had described how his partisan group engaged in 'punitive action' against villagers who had been armed by the Germans and had shot partisans attempting to requisition food.[21] Although a

20 https://defendinghistory.com/litvaks-and-their-descendants-issue-public-letter-calling-for-change-in-lithuanian-governments-holocaust-policies/17627 . I was not surprised to see that the signatories included my brother's South African friend, Saul Issroff. Saul is a dermatologist by training, but has devoted himself to Litvak genealogy. He is author, with Rose Lerer-Cohen, of *The Holocaust in Lithuania: A book of remembrance, 1939–1945*, 4 Volumes. London: Gefen Publishing House, 2002.

21 In returning a Lithuanian medal of honour, Dov Levin added, 'These weren't just any villagers. They attacked the Jews, raped women, took property – before the Germans arrived. I wish I had also participated in those operations.' Haviv Rettig Gur, 'Prof. Dov Levin sends back presidential award for Holocaust-era courage to Lithuanian president', *Jerusalem Post*, 6 April, 2008. See also Tim Whewell 'Reopening Lithuania's old wounds'. 2008.

regrettable act of violence against ethnic Lithuanians, the referral to the state prosecutor was a pretty implausible attempt to suggest that Jews were perpetrators and not just victims, and nothing came of it.

The two Davids and their readers and supporters also railed against the research and other activities supported by the official Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, whose director is nominated by the Lithuanian Prime Minister before being confirmed by the Lithuanian legislature. Given its lack of academic independence, this group has denounced the centre as a means for the government to lionize the resistance against the Soviets, while deflecting from the mass killings of Jews. This negative view of the Centre is articulated, despite the Centre's chief historian, Arūnas Bubnys, having formally acknowledged what he called the 'racial genocide' (the word 'racial' sits oddly) of the Jews and the involvement of the Lithuanian police:

> The second stage (end of July–November 1941). It was the period of racial genocide. The Jews were persecuted not because of political reasons but because they were Jews. In that period almost all the Jews from the Lithuanian provinces were killed. The most extensive massacre took place from August to the middle of September. Temporary Jewish ghettos and isolation cams were being established until the massive elimination of Jews in the provinces(s) was finished. It was the preparation period for the massacre. That process started circa at the end of July and continued to the middle of August. A very important moment at that stage was a secret order No 3 of the Police department director V. Reivytis on the detention and concentration of Jews in specially chosen places.[22]

This apparently even-handed approach by Bubnys did not convince Dov Levin. Perhaps it is just as well that he was no longer with us when, in January 2020, Lithuania's then prime minister, Saulius Skvernelis, announced that he would head a committee intending to draft legislation declaring that neither Lithuania nor its leaders participated in the Holocaust. The proposed bill was a copycat of the Holocaust bill passed by Poland's Senate in 2018, which makes it illegal to accuse the Polish nation or state of complicity in the Nazi Holocaust.[23] As of early 2020, official Lithuanian views of its murky past seemed to have reverted to a full-blinker mode.

The Foti intervention

Into this contentious jumble of erasure, folkloric recognition and obfuscation dropped a historical and literary bombshell, Sylvia's Foti's biography of her grandfather, Jonas Noreika (1910–1947). Published in 2021, the book was provocatively titled *The Nazi's granddaughter*.[24] Far from being a Nazi, in the minds of many ethnic Lithuanians, Noreika was a patriotic hero, his status being demonstrated by, on the one hand, being

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/7508375.stm.

22 Arūnas Bubnys, 'Holocaust in the Lithuanian Provinces' n.d. https://doczz.net/doc/5765399/dr-a.-bubny-s-holocaust-in-lithuanian p.74. This translation from the original Lithuanian is undated and its English phrasing is somewhat clunky.

23 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-42898882

imprisoned by the Nazis (1943–5) then, on the other, being arrested by the KGB in March 1946 and executed a year later in Soviet-controlled Lithuania. He was posthumously awarded the Cross of the Order of Vytis (1st class) in 1997, conferred for the heroic defence of Lithuania's freedom and independence, while a school, at least two streets and goodness knows what else, were named after him. Meanwhile, a plaque in his honour on the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Vilnius was attacked, stuck together again, removed, then replaced with a reworded plaque, all to cries of outrage and anger. Who was Noreika and why did his memorialization stir such passions?

Figure 6: The smashed plaque commemorating Jonas Noreika, Library of the Academy of Sciences, Vilnius

Jonas Noreika published an anti-Semitic booklet in 1933 (aged 23) titled *Hold Your Head High, Lithuanian!!!* Among other charming sentiments, Noreika issued this warning: 'Remember that, by selling a sizable property to a Jew, you are hurting your brother Lithuanians, because you take away the profit from them and give it to the Jew! By selling to or buying from a Jew, you are increasing the Jewish tribe! You are greatly harming our whole nation!' (Amazingly, this booklet was reissued to military cadets in 2016.)

When he was governor of Šiauliai city and county in August 1941 under the Nazi regime, Noreika ordered the rounding up of Jews and their settlement in ghettos, his signature appearing on 70 documents. As Foti observes, at that time, this could only mean one thing – they would be taken to the woods and murdered.[25] (My heart sank when I realized this was the adjacent county to my own family's home.)

24 Silvia Foti, *The Nazi's granddaughter: How I discovered my grandfather was a war criminal*, Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2021.
25 Sylvia Foti pp. 108–10.

Noreika was even more directly implicated in the mass murder of the Jews in Plungė and Telšiai (just 41 minutes from Viekšniai!) and worked hard to unite the extreme right-wing groups, the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), the Lithuanian National Party and the Iron Wolf Front.[26]

A telling example of his conduct is that Noreika and his family moved into a house after the Plungė massacre that had 'suddenly become free'. 'The Jews were gone, so the house was free', Foti's aunt recalled. 'Many Lithuanians were moving into new free houses', she added.[27] (The psychology of these thefts turns around feelings of anger, envy and a sense of entitlement – thus, even though we have ordered their deaths, it's OK to steal from them because they stole from us.)

There remains one important piece of the puzzle to explain. If Noreika was such a Nazi, as his granddaughter claimed, why were he and 45 of his companions (mainly in the LAF) imprisoned by the Nazis at Stutthof concentration camp from March 1943 until the camp's dissolution on 25 January 1945. The easiest way to understand this is that Noreika was a dedicated anti-communist and a rabid anti-Semite, two positions that coincided perfectly with the aims of the Nazi occupiers. However, he was also a Lithuanian nationalist and was not prepared to be under the thumb of the Nazi Kommandant. While at Stutthof, he was treated as an 'honourable' prisoner, this status signifying that he and other members of the LAF were still seen as useful potential allies.

The widespread coverage of Foti's book (including, for example, an interview with her on the prestigious BBC programme 'Hardtalk') has undoubtedly shifted the debate and forced some degree of soul-searching among ethnic Lithuanians at how their past encounters with Jewish Lithuanians were carefully massaged out of sight. However, strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to understand Noreika not as a Nazi, but as a willing and wholehearted Nazi collaborator, so long as he could aim his pen and his rifle at Jews and Bolsheviks (who were often conjoined in the minds of members of the LAF).

Conclusion

When, in January 2020, the Lithuanian prime minister announced plans to legislate away any substantive Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust, it looked as if Lithuania's policies towards its Litvaks, past and present, had gone full-on, right-wing populist. However, this is not the case – official positions have always been more ambivalent and more contested.

26 Sylvia Foti pp. 263–7.
27 Ron Grossman 'She thought her grandfather was a Lithuanian hero. Research leads her to ask, was he a patriot or a Nazi?' *Chicago Tribune* , 14 June 2019.

Just four months later, in May 2020, Povilas Poderskis (vice minister of Foreign Affairs) accompanied the German, Israeli and American ambassadors to a ceremony at the Lithuanian Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius marking the end of the Second World War. Again, although Lithuania's current (2021) prime minister is from the centre-right, she is a dignified and competent economist, not a rabble-rousing populist.

More importantly, Lithuanian public opinion is still closely aligned to core liberal values, including respect for human and minority rights. In a Eurobarometer survey conducted in November–December 2020, a representative sample of Lithuanians were asked, 'How important or not is a social Europe to you personally (that is to say, a Europe that cares for equal opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion)?' No fewer than 88 per cent of the population said 'social Europe' was 'very important' or 'fairly important'.[28] The Lithuanian population is highly educated, the education of women being particularly notable, while 70 per cent of Lithuanians support the EU, the highest percentage of any EU country. Lithuania is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. In the Alliance's documentation, the government announced that 'Lithuania has made teaching about the Holocaust obligatory in schools, and more than 130 Tolerance Education Centres have been set up in secondary schools.'

The government, in short, is riding two horses, which, after the Foti intervention, will have to stop. It is time that the activities of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) and provisional government, which collaborated with the Nazis, are fully and frankly confronted. It is time that the ugly stain of anti-Semitism is exposed. As the Gospel of St John (8:32) declares, 'the truth will set you free' even if, as Gloria Steinem adds, 'it will first piss you off'. What's more, I can hear ethnic Lithuanians groaning, 'What are we supposed to do? Will we never satisfy those demanding Litvaks from the diaspora?'

I have to admit that after a few centuries of periodically getting our arses kicked (and worse), we are well versed in the practice of *kvetching* (endlessly complaining). However, I think I can intuit the core sentiments of South African Litvaks. We would like acceptance, recognition and reconciliation, but we don't expect 'the full German'. I use the expression 'the full German' to refer to the massive efforts made by post-war German governments to right the wrongs of the past, even to the point of paying significant financial compensation to Jewish victims and their descendants. In May 2021, the German government faced another historical demon – the killing, torture and expulsion of tens of thousands of Herero and Nama between 1904 and 1908. Germany agreed to pay Namibia €1.1 billion in development grants in compensation for these genocidal attacks.

I am pretty sure that no South African Litvak will expect financial compensation from Lithuania. We were all beneficiaries of the injustices of apartheid and I do not know of a single South African Litvak who did not admire, respect and even love Nelson Mandela.

28 European Commission *Special Eurobarometer 509* Social Issues. Lithuania November–December, 2020

First, truth, then reconciliation – that's the South African way. As for our cousins in the USA, I am not so sure. With increased affluence went a drift towards the Republican party and, I fear, some American Litvaks even became devotees of that first-class s*htunk* (nasty, vile person), Donald J. Trump. Perhaps they will need to be paid off with a golf course on the Baltic or some garish hotel in downtown Vilnius.

For my part, I miss my lost home in Lithuania and wish I could embrace it. The good people of Viekšniai are welcome to my grandfather's fancy goods store, though I would appreciate a handshake or an apology from the descendants of those who moved into our 'free' family house. Germany is now a wholesome and welcoming place, Poland and Hungary not so much. I am convinced that the younger people of Lithuania want to move to the German way and look forward to a secure, prosperous, tolerant and guilt-free future.

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Author note

Robin Cohen is Professor Emeritus of Development Studies and Senior Research Fellow, Kellogg College, University of Oxford. A list of his publications, and many free downloads, can be found here: https://oxford.academia.edu/RobinCohen.