

Digging up the future

A recent attempt by Baltic states to equate Nazi and Soviet crimes during WWII has detractors claiming these nations are shirking responsibility for their past by claiming Jews also committed genocide

• RICKY BEN-DAVID
Jerusalem Post correspondent

VILNIUS – The eerie silence at Paneriai, a village 25 minutes outside this Lithuanian city where 100,000 were killed during World War II – 70,000 of them Jews – is deafening. Seventy years ago, in three years between July 1941 and August 1944, just over 30 percent of Lithuania's 220,000-strong Jewish community was killed and shoved into mass graves, the largest of which measures 10 meters in diameter. The adjacent railway was the main mode of transportation for the intended victims, but some were marched the 10 kilometers from the Vilnius ghetto.

Men, women and children were lined up and shot by the German SS Einsatzgruppe and the Ypatingas Burys, a Lithuanian killing squad consisting mainly of volunteers. The mass killings were documented by SS officer and Einsatzkommando leader Karl Jager in a series of entries later called the Jager Report, where a typical log read:

"On my instructions and orders the following executions were conducted by Lithuanian partisans:

4.7.41 Kauen-Fort VII 416 Jews, 47 Jewesses
[Total] 463

6.7.41 Kauen-Fort VII 2,514 Jews"

Another meticulous record of events was kept by Polish-Lithuanian journalist Kazimierz Sakowicz in the form of a diary between 1941 and 1943. Sakowicz and his wife lived in Ponary (Polish for Paneriai) in an apartment adjacent to the forested areas where thousands were executed. He wrote down his eyewitness account on sheets of paper, which he placed in bottles, sealed and then buried. The account was first published in Polish in 1999 and in English in 2005 as *Ponary Diary 1941-1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, edited by Lithuanian-born Yitzhak Arad, who served as chairman of Yad Vashem.

The separate sheets of paper were painstakingly put together over the course of several years by Dr. Rachel Margolis, a Lithuanian-born Holocaust survivor and author of *A Partisan from Vilna*, who found the first batch of entries while working at the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania years after the war ended.

Margolis now lives in Israel, but until two years ago she made yearly visits to her native Vilnius. In 2007, she received a letter from acquaintances in the city telling her that uniformed people from the Lithuanian prosecutor's office arrived at her registered address looking for her. They said she was wanted for questioning in regard to a battle that took place between Jewish partisans

and villagers of Kaniukai in 1944 – a battle in which she denies involvement. Since then she has not gone back to Lithuania for fear of being arrested or taken in for questioning.

"I'm too old for this," Margolis, who will be 89 this year, told *The Jerusalem Post* in a telephone interview. "My life is here now, my daughter lives here, I will soon have more grandchildren."

Margolis, Yitzhak Arad and two others have been the targets of a campaign started in 2006 in Lithuania to investigate those who joined the partisans for alleged war crimes against Lithuanian civilians during World War II.

"This is outrageous," says Dr. Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem and coordinator of Nazi war crimes research worldwide for the center. "Not a single Lithuanian war criminal has been punished in Lithuania and they are going after elderly Jewish people?"

Some 15 suspected Lithuanian war criminals were found in the United States in the 1990s, says Zuroff, of whom only three stood trial in Lithuania: Aleksanzras Lileikis, commander of the Saugumas, the Lithuanian security police, Kzys Gimzauskas, his deputy, and Algimantas Dailize, a Saugumas operative in Vilnius. The three were stripped of their US citizenships and deported in the early- to mid-90s, but due to some serious foot-dragging – and to avoid looking "unpatriotic" – Zuroff says they only stood trial in 2000, 2001 and 2006 respectively. They were never arrested because by that time they were deemed medically unfit and were not required to attend legal proceedings. Of the three, only Dailize was convicted of accessory to murder and sentenced to five years' imprisonment – which he never served.

"These were show trials," says Zuroff. "Lithuania was fairly newly independent and just becoming a member of the EU and NATO, and it wanted to show that it was up to par, but it turned the whole judicial process into a farce."

"They are doing this in order not to have to talk about the Lithuanians' battle against the Jews, how they shot the Jews. My parents, my whole family was shot by Lithuanians. They don't want to talk about that, but they want to show that the Jews did them a lot of harm," Margolis said in a 2009 interview with Dovid Katz, founder of the Web site Holocaust in the Baltics (www.holocaustinthebaltics.com) and of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University.

Brooklyn-born Katz, who is of Lithuanian heritage, moved to Vilnius in 1999 to start the Yiddish Institute and only began his Web site – which houses an impressive collection of entries, statements, documents, links and photographs in Lithuanian, English and Yiddish



related to the Holocaust in the three Baltic states – in September 2009.

"I started the site because I felt uncomfortable bombarding people with e-mails. With zero technical knowledge, I began to publish everything online," Katz told the *Post*. "I am dedicated to fighting this trend of Holocaust obfuscation and anti-Semitism in the Baltic states."

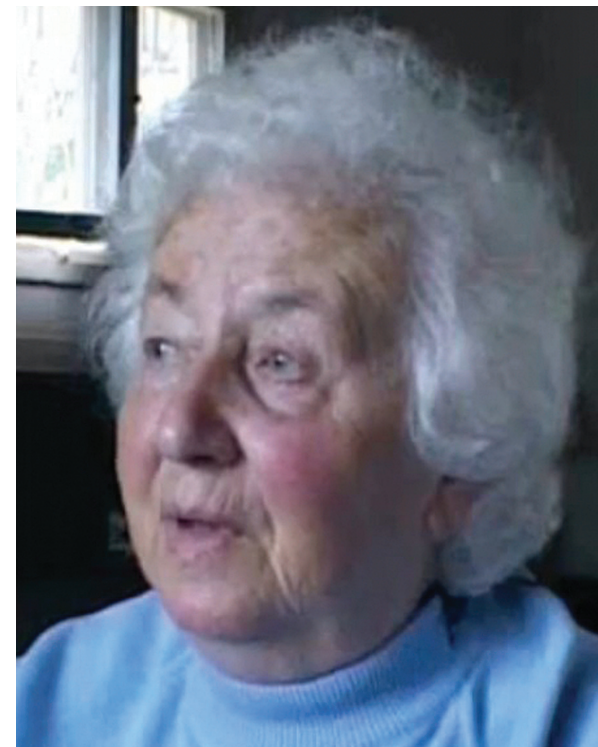
Zuroff and Katz maintain that there is systematic Holocaust distortion, misinformation and miseducation in the Baltic states, and particularly in Lithuania.

"Lithuania had 220,000 Jews before the war started. By the end of 1944, 212,000 were killed – that's 91% of Lithuania's Jewish community. That's one of the highest kill rates in Europe, except for Estonia, which only had 1,000 Jews," says Zuroff. "The Nazis, while very effective, did not do this on their own. In Lithuania, Jews were killed by their neighbors before the first Nazi ever set foot in the country. They don't talk about that. They don't take responsibility."

Indeed, Nazi propaganda painted local Jews as communists, adding fuel to the already existing anti-Semitic fire in the country, and according to Leonidas Donskis, a Lithuanian MP in the European Parliament, "quite a large segment of Lithuanian society is still inclined to consider Jews as collectively responsible for the mass killings and deportations of civilians, as well as



EXCAVATED MASS grave at Paneriai, where thousands were killed and buried by SS men and their Lithuanian collaborators. (Ricky Ben-David)



DR. RACHEL MARGOLIS says she cannot go back to Vilnius for a visit for fear of interrogation or arrest.

other atrocities committed during the Soviet occupation," he told CNN in June.

"The most problematic right now is the Prague Declaration," says Katz, referring to the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism of June 3, 2008, which seeks to have European parliaments recognize the communist atrocities in the same way Nazi ones were.

The declaration states that "Europe will not be united unless it is able to reunite its history, recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy and bring about an honest and thorough debate on all the totalitarian crimes of the past century," and calls for the "recognition that many crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity serving as a warning for future generations, in the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal." It also calls for the "establishment of 23rd August, the day of signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as a day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes."

The document has 27 founding signatories from officials around Europe, including Germany, the Czech Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It is also signed by European Parliament member Vytautas Landsbergis, a former dissident and president of Lithuania, and Emanuelis Zingeris, a Jewish member of the Lithuanian Parliament and chairman of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, also known as the International Historical Commission for short.

This attempt at equating Nazi and Soviet crimes has been called the "double genocide" theory, in what many see as an attempt to shirk responsibility by claiming Jews also committed genocide against Lithuanians, so essentially everyone's "even."

"This is part of a campaign to be portrayed as the victims also," says Zuroff.

WHILE UNDOUBTEDLY Lithuania suffered under the Communist regime – the Soviet occupation of the country in 1940 was so brutal that many welcomed the Nazis in 1941 and as the Soviet army reoccupied the country



MONUMENT ERECTED at Paneriai to commemorate the 70,000 Jews killed at the site between 1941 and 1944.

(Ricky Ben-David)

in 1944, hundreds of thousands were killed, deported or imprisoned – the parallel does not stand, argues Zuroff.

Zingeris maintains that the equivalency charge is false and that the Prague Declaration is misunderstood.

“The Czech Republic is very pro-Israel. Lithuania is pro-Israel. This accusation of anti-Semitism and such is wrong. A Soviet-Nazi conspiracy has no place here,” he told the *Post* in his office at the Seimas (the Lithuanian Parliament) in Vilnius.

However, he concedes that some of the wording in the declaration can be viewed as problematic and, as such, insists that there should be a declaration underlining the differences between Nazi and Soviet crimes. He claims that an amendment was implemented in February at the conclusion of the Crimes of the Communist Regimes conference in Prague to reflect the differences. Article seven of this document found online – which makes no mention of the Prague Declaration or who the signatories are – states: “...Communism needs to be condemned in a similar way as Nazism was. We are not equating the respective crimes of Nazism and Communism. They should each be studied and judged on their own terrible merits.”

“Victims of Soviet crimes have a right to be remembered. There was so much hidden during the Soviet years, Lithuanians know little about their own history,” says Zingeris. “Israelis should include in their memory those Jews killed by Joseph Stalin. I see no danger in commemorating the victims of these two evil regimes on the same day [August 23]. There is already an international Holocaust Day.”

As chairman of the International Historical Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation, founded in 1998, Zingeris plays an important role in Holocaust education and research in Lithuania. The commission he heads is charged with publishing educational materials, research projects and other findings and founding “tolerance centers” in Lithuanian schools, of which there are now 67.



MP EMANUELIS ZINGERIS, chairman of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. (Ricky Ben-David)

caust education is mandatory in the fifth, sixth, eighth and 10th grades in Lithuania but that it is up to the teachers to decide how much time to spend on any given topic. “We provide supplementary materials and encourage teachers to spend more time on such subjects,” he tells the *Post*. “We also encourage them to become part of our Tolerance Centers network and adopt our Holocaust education program, through which we try to develop a system of values. Teenagers in our programs go on organized trips to Paneriai and other places where Jews were killed.”

There are over 200 such sites in the country and Racinkas and his team encourage all schools to visit them in their locations “as not everyone can make to Paneriai.”

DOVID KATZ is unimpressed with Zingeris, Racinkas and their efforts. “Emanuel Zingeris is hated in the Vilnius Jewish community. He is the man who is ‘fixing’ the Holocaust for the Lithuanians in exchange for political gain. He is betraying the memory of the 200,000 Lithuanian Jews killed during World War II.”

Katz’s sharp criticism of Zingeris and the Lithuanian government may be the real reason his contract at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute was not renewed and ends this month, he suspects.

“It is also my view that they went after Rachel Margolis because of her role in getting the *Ponary Diary* published. I know of others who are finding themselves in similar situations.”

These are serious charges which Lithuanian Ambassador to Israel Darius Degutis strongly refutes. “No one will arrest Rachel Margolis or anyone else if they go back [to Lithuania]. Any legal action against Margolis, Arad and others has been stopped,” he tells the *Post*.

“Let’s look at what Lithuania has done to reconcile. This prime minister [Andrius Kubilius] was the first to approve the compensation law [for victims of the Holocaust] which is now making its way through the Parliament. This government has set up a special commission for the preservation of the Vilnius Jewish quarter. Our Holocaust education is one of the best in Europe according to the OECD,” says Degutis.

It should also be noted that Yad Vashem has recognized 728 Righteous Among the Nations in Lithuania, not an insignificant number for a small country.

Degutis adds, “When speaking about Stalinism and Nazism, Lithuanians and eastern Europeans need to be more sensitive when using the term ‘genocide.’ I have no problem saying that I am ashamed of what some Lithuanians did in the past. We need to be more explicit when we say we suffered under Stalinism. It is not about comparing

‘Not a single Lithuanian war criminal has been punished in Lithuania and they are going after elderly Jewish people?’ - Efraim Zuroff

“Anti-Semitism is a problem,” says Zingeris, “We have been sending teachers to Yad Vashem for training and we publish materials to show the extent of Lithuanian collaboration in the killing of Jews during WWII.”

IN 2002, Lithuania became a member of the Task Force for International cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and in 2003 a National Holocaust Education Program was drawn up and implemented by the International Commission. In 2007, the Commission signed a cooperation agreement with the Teachers’ Professional Development Center through which teachers attend Holocaust seminars at Yad Vashem and in Lithuania.

Ronaldas Racinkas, the executive editor of the International Historical Commission, says Holo-

The high rate of Lithuanian collaboration during WWII is a sensitive subject, he says, adding that their program makes it a point to address the issue head on, showing the negative aspects, as painful as they are. “It is our moral responsibility to do so. The problem is that Lithuanians, unfortunately, still perceive the Holocaust as a tragedy that happened to the Jews. But the Jews are part of Lithuania, we have 600 years of Jewish history here. This was a tragedy that happened to all Lithuanians, not just Lithuanian Jews,” says Racinkas.

There are now approximately 4,000 Jews living in Lithuania, most of them in Vilnius.

“We are trying to show that the Holocaust wasn’t just about numbers, it’s about empty streets now where once it was rich with Jewish culture,” he adds.

the two regimes, it is about properly evaluating each of them."

Zuroff claims that the Lithuanian government could be doing much more. "For example, September 23 is Holocaust Day in Lithuania, the day of the forced evacuation of the Vilnius Ghetto in 1943. If a message of acknowledgment is there on their part, why not choose October 28 when, in 1941, 10,000 Jews were murdered by Lithuanians in Kaunas? They have to think of the message they are sending."

"The Prague Declaration must be rescinded," adds Katz.

"But things don't happen in one day," counters Degutis. "Critics such as Efraim Zuroff and Dovid Katz are too reactionary. They won't focus on anything positive that we do."

Last month, the Lithuanian government announced that the Lithuanian PM has set up a task force for the development of a Litvak Heritage Forum which would "unite all Litvaks across the globe into a community." The Simon Wiesenthal Center blasted the move and accused the Lithuanian government of "trying to enlist Jewish support for its ongoing campaigns of Holocaust distortion and promoting a false equivalency between Communist and Nazi crimes."

"Such an initiative is the equivalent of forming an Armenian support group for Turkish efforts to deny the Armenian genocide," said Zuroff in a press release on the matter.

The Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel, the world's largest organization of Jews of Lithuanian descent (Litvaks), called for a boycott of the new initiative on Tuesday. Association chairman Josef Melamed commented: "Our association understands the Lithuanian government's true intentions: muster Litvak support for a false narrative of World War II that minimized the extensive complicity of Lithuanian Nazi collaborators in the mass murder of the Jews in Lithuania and outside her borders."

"This is an outrageous case of national identity theft," adds Dovid Katz.

SO IS Lithuania doing enough to battle its Holocaust demons? Zuroff doesn't think so.

"You can't say that Lithuania doesn't talk about the Holocaust. It does. A lot. But it omits and distorts very critical parts," says Zuroff.

In the fall, the Simon Wiesenthal Center will release its annual report on the worldwide investigation and prosecution of Nazi war criminals, of which the initial findings were published on Holocaust Day in April. The full 50-page report includes details about the number of convictions, indictments and ongoing investigations of Nazis in European countries and a most-wanted list. The Center also gives out grades based on performance over the last year. In 2006, Lithuania got a B for its conviction of Dailize but when the courts refused to implement the punishment "we were astounded," says Zuroff. Since then, the country has gotten an F consistently.

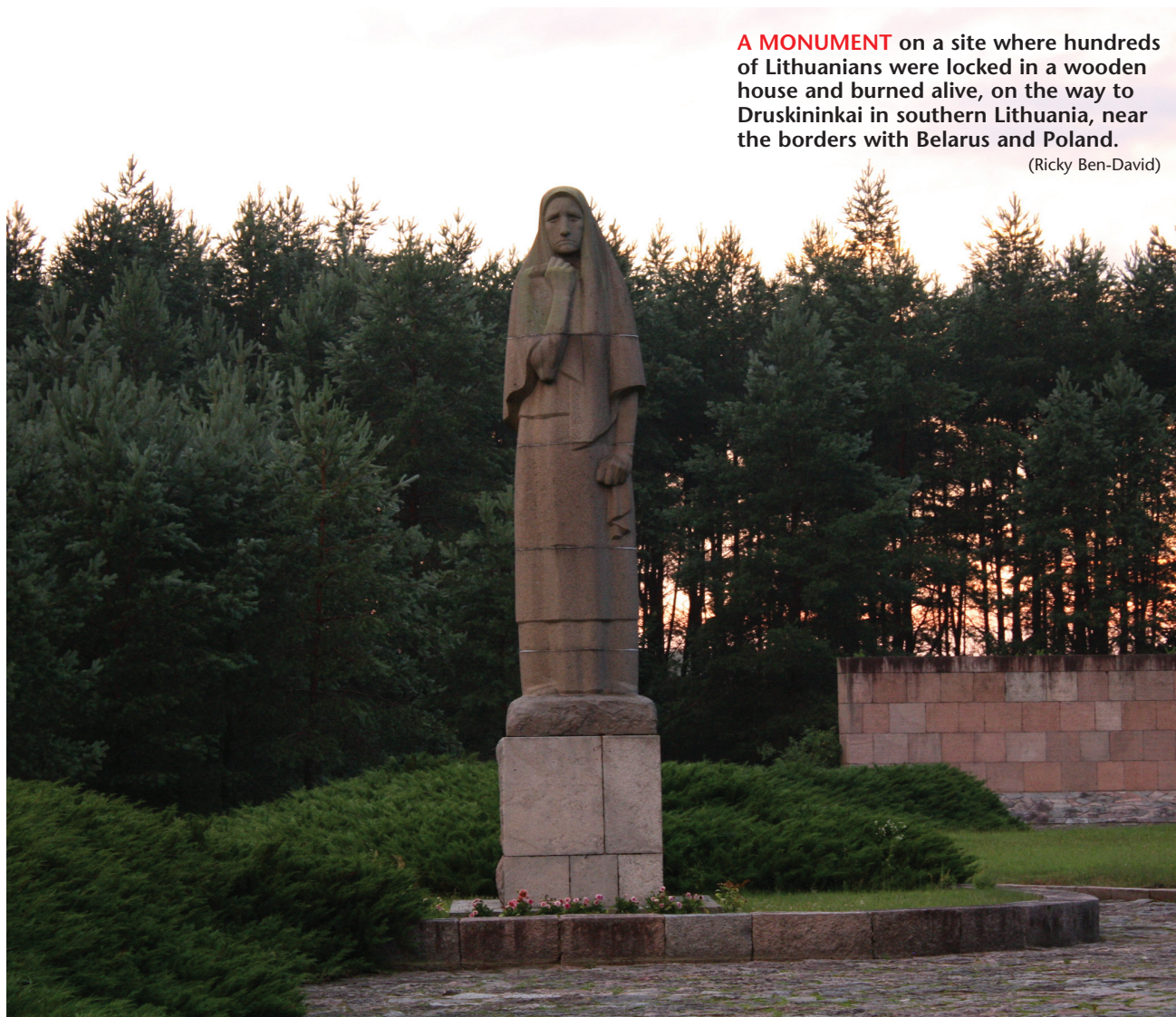
Darius Degutis feels that there is still room for hope.

"If we work at building on the positive, we can achieve much more. I would like to see them trust our intentions and not resort to automatic criticism every time we make a move."

The writer is the op-ed editor at The Jerusalem Post.

A MONUMENT on a site where hundreds of Lithuanians were locked in a wooden house and burned alive, on the way to Druskininkai in southern Lithuania, near the borders with Belarus and Poland.

(Ricky Ben-David)



DOVID KATZ, founder of the Web site www.holocaustinthebaltics.com and the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, where he was professor of Yiddish Language until last month.

(Ricky Ben-David)