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NEWS



Two terrible truths abide in Lithuanian war crimes

By Will Englund

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VILNIUS, LITHUANIA — VILNIUS, Lithuania -- The killing started even before the Nazis arrived, and it redoubled under German guidance.

By the end of 1942, more than 200,000 Lithuanian Jews were dead -- killed not in concentration camps but in the cities and villages where they lived, shot down by their neighbors.

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The advertisement features a photograph of an elderly woman with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a grey zip-up hoodie. She is smiling and standing in what appears to be a workshop or a garage, with her hand resting on a workbench. The background is slightly blurred, showing various tools and equipment. In the top right corner of the image, there are small blue icons for a play button and a close button. Below the photograph, the text 'P/T Jobs \$30/hr for Seniors' is written in a bold, white font. Underneath that, 'DAN Part Time Jobs' is written in a smaller, white font. To the right of the text, there is a white circular button with a blue right-pointing arrow.

Lithuania's Jewish population has gone from 250,000 in 1938 to 5,500 today. In 1938, Vilnius was one of the most important centers of Jewish culture and scholarship in the world. It had 60 synagogues. Today it has one.

In Vilnius, the past has not been sorted out.

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The advertisement features a photograph of an elderly woman with short grey hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt. She is seen from the back, holding a long, thin, yellow object (possibly a comb or a hairbrush) behind her back. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. In the top right corner of the image, there are small blue icons for a play button and a close button. To the right of the photograph, the text 'Red Flag Signs of Lung Cancer' is written in a bold, black font. Below that, the text 'More than 235,000 people in the US will be diagnosed with lung cancer this year, with a new diagnosis every 2.2 minutes.' is written in a smaller, black font. Underneath that, 'Catching it early is a smart idea.' is written in a smaller, black font. At the bottom, there is a blue link that says 'See The List >>'.

Were all the young men wearing the black uniforms of the Lithuanian Battalions criminals? Or did they become victims? After 50 years of

Communist single-mindedness and determination to crush all enemies and would-be enemies, can anyone know? Are the lies of the past being swept away now by the truth, or simply being replaced by new lies?

As though a lid that was closed in 1945 is just now being lifted, Lithuania is coming up abruptly against the issue of war crimes. Questions that the countries of Western Europe have been dealing with for four decades -- questions of guilt and complicity with Nazi rule -- are suddenly out in the open.

Under Communist rule, those questions were dealt with brusquely and simply: Anyone remotely associated with the Nazis was punished, severely. Probably thousands more were tarred with the same brush, on trumped-up charges, and also punished.

Now, Lithuania is rehabilitating thousands of people who were sent to Siberian camps by the Soviets. But critics ask how many genuine war criminals are getting free passes in the zeal to undo the damage wrought by communism.

The issue was open to unusual scrutiny earlier this month in a court hearing that involved aged veterans of the Lithuanian Battalions, firsthand accounts of mass slaughter and recollections that seem to have changed with the political winds over the years.

The whole question of Nazi collaboration is in the forefront in Lithuania today. But it clearly lies ahead for other republics as well that have emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union: Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine

and Moldova. Last week, for instance, Moldova granted veterans' status to soldiers who served in World War II in the Romanian army, which fought alongside the Germans against the Soviets.

Wiping the slate clean

In Lithuania, the outward signs of 50 years of communism are being wiped away with a vengeance. Lithuanians have fervently eradicated the slogans, the hammers and sickles, the red stars, the Marxes and Lenins that at one time afflicted every Soviet city.

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They want to wipe the slate clean.

Whatever was done in the name of communism, the Lithuanians would undo. Those who the Communists put down, the Lithuanians today would raise up. What once was wrong, now is right.

On May 2, 1990, the Lithuanian government of President Vytautas Landsbergis established a commission to "rehabilitate" those convicted of

resisting "the occupying regime." Almost 23,000, convicted of a variety of crimes over four decades, have been rehabilitated so far. Their records have been cleared, they have been allowed to reclaim confiscated property and they have been paid 50 rubles for each month spent in prison.

Mindaugas Losys, chairman of the supreme court and head of the rehabilitation commission, said 600 appeals have been turned down because evidence was found of actual war crimes -- the murder or torture of civilians during World War II.

But some here contend that perhaps thousands of others who served in the Nazi-led battalions have been unjustly rehabilitated.

"The purpose of these battalions was to kill Jews. There wasn't any other purpose. They weren't fighting on the front," said Faina Kukelinskita, a Vilnius lawyer who represents the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Vienna organization that seeks out Nazi war criminals.

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Ms. Kukelinskita said she would not object if the government were granting

pardons to war criminals, but rehabilitation means that in the government's view no crime was committed.

"Who shot the Jews, if nobody's guilty?" she said. "Rehabilitating these people is like shooting us a second time."

"We're not sweeping this under a rug," Mr. Losys said. "Mostly we are interested in restoring the truth."

The government contends that only a small minority of the Lithuanian Battalions took part in the murder of Jews -- the 600 whose appeals were denied, as well as others who chose not to appeal their convictions in the first place, and those who died and left no survivors.

Ms. Kukelinskita disputes that the numbers could be so small.

The government argues that the KGB went to great lengths to frame people for committing war crimes, coercing confessions and incriminating testimony with threats and torture.

Ms. Kukelinskita states flatly that Mr. Losys' commission has been uninterested in actively pursuing evidence of guilt. The 6,000 men who served in the battalions should be held to account, she said, as well as any others who shot Jews.

Being convicted by the Communists doesn't automatically make you not guilty, she said.

But because the government is not releasing records, she said, it is impossible to know how many rehabilitations should be contested.

Ms. Kukelinskita, who herself was a prosecutor under the Communist regime, said the people in power today simply don't want to confront the unpleasant truth that Lithuanians were enthusiastically killing Jews in 1941.

Some would rather blame the Germans -- and some the Jews themselves.

The Soviets originally occupied Lithuania in 1940, ousting a fascist but not particularly ruthless regime. The Nazis attacked in 1941 and held the country for three years.

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"You should understand, the Jewish tragedy started not with the arrival of the Germans but with the arrival of the Soviets in 1940," said the Rev. Alfonsas Svarinskas, a Roman Catholic priest and member of Parliament who spent 22 years in Soviet camps.

And the nature of that tragedy? "The Jews sided with the Communists," he said. "And the Lithuanians understood that."

One Jewish leader here says that in 1940 the Communists didn't look like such a poor choice compared with the alternative.

But for Catholic Lithuanians, the focus of hatred was always Moscow. Lithuanians resisted communism; partisans roamed the forests until 1953. With the Nazis, there was little trouble.

An unusual libel case

Lithuania's confrontation with the war crimes issue first erupted in September. But the issue of Lithuanian guilt vs. Communist distortions of

history came into sharp relief earlier this month in an unusual libel case brought by Antanas Gecas, a former officer of the 12th Lithuanian Battalion now living in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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The Lithuanian government -- stung by earlier Western press reports implying that all 23,000 of those rehabilitated had served the Nazi cause, which is not true -- saw the case as a chance to prove its argument that the KGB fabricated war-crimes evidence against its enemies.

In 1987, while Lithuania and other Baltic states were still part of the Soviet Union, Mr. Gecas was accused by Soviet officials of having taken part in the mass execution of Jews in Slutsk, a town about 100 miles away in what is now Belarus. The Soviets asked Britain to extradite him, but the British refused.

But a crew from Scottish Television went to Lithuania and interviewed the chief witnesses against Mr. Gecas. They described how soldiers machine-gunned Jews so that they fell into a pit and how Lieutenant Gecas then

climbed into the pit and shot survivors with his revolver.

Soviet prosecutors had directed the witnesses to appear before the Scottish crews, but the producers went ahead and aired the program.

Mr. Gecas, who denied shooting Jews, sued, seeking \$1.1 million. Because the witnesses are now quite elderly, the Scottish court trying the case came to Vilnius to hear two days of testimony.

Scottish Television's defense fared poorly. Juozas Aleksynas said the KGB had forced him to give evidence against Mr. Gecas. He said his account was "exaggerated."

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"There's been too much said against Gecas," he told the court.

Motiejus Migonis, a 73-year-old pig farmer, said he had been at a guard post 30 to 50 yards from the pit and hadn't actually seen any shooting, contrary to what he had told the Scottish crew.

"How could I say what was happening there?" he said.

When the Scottish lawyer persisted in asking about the incident, he replied, "I don't like questions like those. This is getting on my nerves."

Later, he said, "There might be some mistakes pertaining to the investigation by the KGB," but he would not elaborate.

The discomfort of Mr. Aleksynas and Mr. Migonis is perhaps understandable. Before the trial, they had been sent letters by Mr. Losys, pointing out that the authorities would be paying attention to their testimony.

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Afterward, Mr. Losys denied that he had been trying to intimidate the witnesses. "Those letters were written in a very delicate form," he said. "The only aim was to restore the truth. We told them to remember what testimony they had given [to the KGB], and to think of what they could add."

Mr. Aleksynas has changed directions before. A Lithuanian soldier before the war, he became general secretary of the Communist trade union council

after the Soviet takeover in 1940. In 1941, he joined the German army. In 1987, he gave testimony against Mr. Gecas, but now he says he did that only to placate the KGB.

Mr. Gecas himself, after winning a medal from the Germans, left Lithuania to fight in Italy. There he deserted and joined the British, who also gave him a medal. In 1947, he settled in Scotland.

An old acquaintance of Mr. Gecas', Juozas Sarka, 79, who spent six years in Soviet camps, went to the hearing. He said he is sure the KGB fabricated its case. Mr. Gecas was a good Christian, he said. "A man with such morals could not shoot innocent women and children."

The libel case is continuing, back in Edinburgh. But here in Vilnius, two terrible truths abide.

More than 100,000 Lithuanians were shipped east to Soviet labor camps, as Moscow tried, in the end without success, to eradicate the country's independent spirit. "They were factories of death for tens of thousands of people," said Vladas Sarka, Juozas' brother.

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And even for those who survived, the system warped their lives. The KGB broke men's spirits, extracted confessions and denunciations of friends and family, and built a regime with blackmail and torture.

But the other truth has to do with the 200,000 Jews who died here. In June 1941, in the short period after the Red army retreated but before the Nazis advanced into Lithuania, several thousand were killed by eager Lithuanians.

Then the Nazis formed 15 battalions to carry on the work.

"If it could happen once," said Ms. Kukelinskita, "why couldn't it happen once more, if no one speaks up about it?"

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