Lithuania’s Blind Eye to Nazi Past

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JAN. 4, 1998 12 AM PT

VILNIUS, Lithuania —

For more than two years, Juozas Grabauskas has lived quietly in a 10th-floor, Soviet-style apartment here. His neighbors say he told them that he once lived in America. He never mentioned, however, that his U.S. citizenship was revoked because he lied about his Nazi past.

Grabauskas kept quiet about a U.S. judge’s finding that he was an officer with an infamous Lithuanian battalion that killed more than 10,000 Jews during World War II. He has kept such a low profile that even the Lithuanian prosecutor in charge of war crimes cases said he had never heard of him.

And Grabauskas, now 78, is still not talking.

“What do you want from him? What do you want from him?” demanded an elderly woman who answered his door.

“He is not well enough to talk to anybody,” she said, shutting the door.

Despite his silence, the former Chicago chemist is at the heart of a growing international controversy over Lithuania’s reluctance to prosecute a group of accused Nazi war criminals who were discovered in the United States and compelled to return to their native land.

Since 1992, Grabauskas and five other elderly Lithuanians accused of serious World War II crimes have left the U.S. and found a haven in newly independent Lithuania, despite strong evidence against them uncovered by the U.S. Justice Department.

Although Lithuanian leaders have promised to prosecute Nazi war criminals “consistently and conscientiously,” none of the six has been charged or brought to trial in Lithuania. Already, two have died of old age--including admitted war criminal Antanas Mineikis, who died in November after living for more than two years in a rest home at the Lithuanian government’s expense.

Moreover, the former Soviet republic has made no effort to extradite four other accused war criminals fighting U.S. efforts to deport them.

“Lithuania is delaying and waiting for the ‘biological solution’ to take hold,” said Neal M. Sher, former director of the U.S. Justice Department unit that tracked down the accused Nazi collaborators in the United States.

Before World War II, so many Jews lived in Vilnius that the capital city was known as the “Jerusalem of the North.”

Today, so many alleged Nazis live freely in Lithuania that Sher, likening it to the South American country that has sheltered Nazis, calls it “the new Paraguay.”

U.S. and Israeli critics contend that Lithuania’s lack of action stems from its unwillingness to face its wartime past and the fact that many of its citizens cooperated wholeheartedly with the Nazis in killing 220,000 Lithuanian Jews--about 95% of the country’s Jewish population.

International Outrage

International outrage over the war crimes cases threatens to isolate this small Baltic nation as it seeks to strengthen its economic ties with the West.

Vice President Al Gore, members of the U.S. Congress, the European Union, Israeli leaders and the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center have joined in protesting Lithuania’s failure to act.

In a letter to Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas in November, 30 members of Congress warned that failure to prosecute accused war criminals could jeopardize Lithuania’s chance of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization--one of the country’s priorities.

“We are fully aware of, and warmly encourage, Lithuania’s efforts to rejoin the family of democratic nations,” the lawmakers said. “At the same time, it must be unequivocally clear that an uncompromising commitment to the attainment of justice is an absolute requirement for this process.”

Most troubling to the international community is the case of Aleksandras Lileikis, the chief of the Lithuanian Security Police in Nazi-occupied Vilnius. U.S. prosecutors say he is one of the most notorious war criminals ever discovered in the United States. But 1 1/2 years after the 90-year-old Lileikis returned to his homeland, Lithuania has halted its investigation of his alleged war crimes.

“If Lileikis dies in his bed, Lithuania will have trouble for decades overcoming the reputation that it never prosecuted war criminals,” said a Western diplomat who asked not to be identified. “To let him die will not make the issue go away. On the contrary, it will leave a permanent spot.”

The issue has surfaced only now, more than 50 years after the war ended, because U.S. investigators have discovered incriminating Nazi-era documents in Lithuania’s formerly secret Soviet archives.

After Lithuania gained independence in 1990, the new government opened its records to the U.S. Justice Department’s Office of Special Investigations, which tracks down suspected war criminals in the United States.

Researchers found evidence against Lithuanian Nazi collaborators who entered the United States illegally by concealing their wartime activities.

Yet in Lithuania, there has been little willingness to use the same documents to pursue suspected Nazi war criminals.

‘It’s a Sad Story’

Political leaders have no desire to delve into a troubling period of history that would tarnish the image of Lithuanian patriotism and impose the burden of “collective guilt” on their fledgling nation.

“They would prefer to look at themselves as victims rather than look at the issue of their collaboration,” said Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, who has angered Lithuanians by drawing attention to their nation’s role in the Holocaust. “It’s a sad story, because these are people who murdered their neighbors. It’s not like other countries, where collaborators sent them off to camps to be killed elsewhere.”

Lithuania’s presidential foreign policy advisor, Nevis Germanas, however, contends that the role of Lithuanians in aiding the Nazis has been exaggerated and says he wishes the issue would simply die.

“Why the U.S. is talking about Lileikis I can’t understand,” he said. “All the problems come from the U.S. and Jewish organizations. The more we talk about this problem--the more we talk about figures like thousands of Lithuanians were involved--the harder it’s going to be to find a solution. The less we talk about it, the easier it’s going to be to find a way out.”

Lithuania’s goal of placating the West while not digging up disturbing memories has resulted in periodic pronouncements about the government’s intention to prosecute alleged war criminals--followed by months of official inaction.

Last spring, Kazys Pednycia took over as Lithuania’s general prosecutor, cleaned house and brought in prosecutor Kazimieras Kovarskas to handle Nazi-era crimes. Pednycia acknowledged that the cases were handled poorly in the past but insisted that Lithuania is now doing all it can to bring accused war criminals to justice.

“There was not enough experience, not enough effort in these cases, but there wasn’t a deliberate attempt to conceal the facts,” Pednycia said. “I will try to correct the situation. We hope the world does not think that our lack of success means there is a lack of desire.”

But in the same breath, Pednycia expressed wariness about reexamining this chapter of Lithuanian history. He said it is important not to brand all Lithuanians as Nazi collaborators, and he pointed out that some Lithuanians risked their lives to help Jews escape the slaughter.

“We can never blame the nation as a whole,” he said. “If we look at the cases of genocide, we can see the Lithuanians were acting under the influence of the Germans.”

A Bitter Legacy

Located at a crossroads between Europe’s major powers, Lithuania had the misfortune to be occupied by both Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Atrocities committed by the Soviets and the Nazis have left Lithuanians with a bitter legacy and the conviction that they were the victims of two “genocides.”

Lithuania gained its independence after World War I but was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. Many Jews, along with other Lithuanians, were killed or sent to Siberia by the Communists, but other Jews were given positions of power in government for the first time, contributing to rising anti-Semitism among Lithuanians.

Leaders of the Lithuanian independence movement--who escaped to Berlin during this Soviet period--issued a directive to their compatriots in March 1941 to “get rid of the Jews” and to create such a bad atmosphere that no Jew would ever again think there was “any possibility of existence” in Lithuania.

When the Germans invaded three months later, many Lithuanians welcomed them as saviors who would liberate them from Bolsheviks and Jews.

As the Soviet army retreated, some Lithuanians formed paramilitary units and killed thousands of Jews in a matter of days--without orders from the Germans.

After the Nazis took power, young Lithuanian men joined volunteer execution squads that helped shoot Jews by the thousands at killing sites across Lithuania. The largest scene of mass murder was in the woods at Paneriai near Vilnius, where 100,000 men, women and children--70% of them Jews--were lined up beside large pits and shot, their bodies falling on top of those killed before them.

When the Soviets seized power again in 1943, some Lithuanian war criminals were caught and punished, but others fled to the West on the heels of the Germans and vanished among Europe’s mass of postwar refugees. Some concealed their Nazi ties and illegally obtained visas to enter the United States.

Under Soviet rule, propagandists perfected a simplified view of history that portrayed the Nazis’ victims as “Soviet citizens” and minimized the role of Lithuanians in the killings.

Today, Lithuanians raised under the Soviets are largely ignorant of the extermination of Lithuania’s Jews and the role their compatriots played in it.

Before they fled in 1943, the Nazis destroyed most records of their crimes. But in the charred files there remained enough documents to prove that a handful of old men living quietly in the United States shared responsibility for the deaths of tens of thousands of Lithuanian Jews.

Under U.S. law, suspected Nazi war criminals cannot be charged with genocide but can be stripped of their citizenship and deported if they concealed their past to enter the country.

Archives Yield Evidence

Eli Rosenbaum, who now heads the Office of Special Investigations in Washington, had tried since the early 1980s to build a case against Lileikis, the former Vilnius police chief. In the Lithuanian archives, investigators found the evidence they needed: documents signed by Lileikis turning dozens of Jews over to their executioners.

Among the records was an order signed by Lileikis on Dec. 1, 1941, for the arrest of Gitta Kaplan and her 6-year-old daughter, Fruma, on charges of escaping the Jewish ghetto in Vilnius.

The next day, after reviewing a report on Kaplan’s interrogation, Lileikis signed an order handing them over to the German Security Police, or Gestapo. Nineteen days later, the records show, they were shot at Paneriai.

“It isn’t hard to imagine 6-year-old Fruma Kaplan and her mother, Gitta, being forced to the killing pits at Paneriai in the dead of winter 56 Decembers ago, shivering in the winter air, child clinging to mother in their final awful moments,” Rosenbaum said.

“The Lileikis case is the one that keeps me awake at night,” he added. “I have my own 6-year-old daughter now.”

Lileikis’ department, known as the Saugumas, reported directly to the Gestapo. It was responsible for enforcing the Germans’ anti-Jewish decrees, including confining more than 60,000 Jews under deplorable conditions in the Vilnius ghetto until they could be executed.

Part of the Saugumas’ job was to capture Jews attempting to escape. Using undercover agents, Lileikis’ police force set up sting operations to catch them and send them to be shot.

After the war, Lileikis fled to Germany. He lived there for more than a decade before he obtained a U.S. visa by claiming that he was a victim of Communist persecution. In 1996, a U.S. court ruled that he had lied to enter the United States and revoked the citizenship granted him in 1976.

He flew to Lithuania before he could be deported. He now lives in a modern apartment building in downtown Vilnius where security guards keep away unwanted visitors.

Looked after by his relatives, he has been in and out of the hospital but is still well enough to go for occasional walks.

“There was a time when he helped us, and now we help him,” said Vitalija Armoskiene, 39, a niece who is a nurse and assists with his medical care. “I never ask him about these things. The only thing he said was, ‘I came back to seek the truth myself.’ ”

Lileikis declined to talk with the Los Angeles Times. His attorney, Algirdas Matuiza, said his client will never be found guilty and asserted that any incriminating documents were forged by Communists during Soviet times.

U.S. Justice Department lawyers reject such claims and say the records have been authenticated by experts.

When he lived in Norwood, Mass., Lileikis consistently denied his complicity in Nazi war crimes. But in an interview last year with the Vilnius newspaper Respublika, he spoke more freely.

“All of us were collaborators--the whole nation, since it was acting according to Nazi laws,” he said. “I needed to clothe myself and eat. I was offered a job and I accepted it. . . . I got into a mess and I got stuck. . . . So probably I made mistakes. Mistakes, or let’s say the ‘crimes’ which I am accused of.”

Special Consideration

Since Lileikis landed in Lithuania, he has received special consideration from the government.

The first prosecutor in the case, Gintautis Starkus, said he was instructed by his superiors not to ask any “harsh questions” because of Lileikis’ health. Starkus also told the media that Lileikis was “an honest man” who had “withstood heroically” a four-hour talk with investigators.

Six months ago, the government announced that it would open a formal investigation into Lileikis, the first step toward bringing charges. But at the same time, officials said the nonagenarian would not be put on trial because his health would prevent him from attending court sessions, as required by law.

The Parliament passed a measure last month that would change court procedures and allow Lileikis to be tried without being present. Even so, critics worry that old age will catch up with Lileikis before Lithuanian law ever does: Prosecutor Kovarskas said he is unable to investigate the case because a committee of government-appointed doctors has concluded that Lileikis is too ill to be questioned.

“It is not possible to have an investigation,” Kovarskas said. “Stress can cause damage to the state of his health.”

In November, the prosecutor’s office opened its only active investigation into an accused Nazi collaborator found in the United States: Kazys Gimzauskas, who was the Saugumas deputy chief in Vilnius under Lileikis.

Like Lileikis, Gimzauskas signed papers transferring prisoners to be killed, the records show. Among the documents found in the archives was an order from Gimzauskas handing over Lucija Pojevanskaite-Sutarskaite, a U.S.-born Roman Catholic, to her executioners. She was shot at Paneriai as a “suspected Jew.”

When the U.S. began investigating Gimzauskas in 1993, he left his home in Florida and moved back to Vilnius--where it took more than three years before Lithuania opened its own investigation into his past. The United States revoked his citizenship in 1996.

Today, Gimzauskas lives on the first floor of an ugly concrete high-rise. Outside his window is a dilapidated children’s playground covered in snow. Amelia Masiulioniene, a niece who helps take care of him, said his health has deteriorated in recent weeks; sometimes he gets lost in his small apartment and forgets where he is.

“He’s losing his mind already. What can an old person tell you?”

Efficient Executioners

In their search through Nazi records, U.S. investigators found the names of more than 500 Lithuanians who belonged to the notorious 2nd Auxiliary Police Service Battalion.

The unit was so efficient at conducting executions that the Germans sent it in 1941 to neighboring Belorussia (now Belarus), where its members traveled from village to village killing more than 10,000 Jews.

The battalion’s orders for the Belorussian expedition list four men later discovered living in the United States, including Grabauskas, who was identified as a junior lieutenant.

As an officer, Grabauskas would have been responsible for organizing and overseeing executions.

Historians say his duties would have included walking among the victims and dispatching with a pistol those only wounded by the firing squads. In addition, U.S. prosecutors say, Grabauskas was a battalion interpreter and served as a key link with the Germans who directed the unit’s operations.

Grabauskas moved back to Lithuania in 1993 after acknowledging that he entered the U.S. illegally. The United States notified the Lithuanian government of Grabauskas’ return and offered to provide evidence against him, but Lithuania has not taken any action.

When Kovarskas, the new war crimes prosecutor, was asked the status of Lithuania’s case against Grabauskas, he looked puzzled and paused for a moment.

“Grabauskas?” he asked. “It’s the first time in my life I have heard of him.”

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Nazi-Era Collaborators Return to Lithuania

Since 1993, six people accused of Nazi war crimes who were tracked down in the United States have returned to their native Lithuania, where they have remained free without facing prosecution. The U.S. is seeking to deport four other Lithuanians accused of war crimes; so far, the Lithuanian government has taken no action to investigate their cases or extradite them.

Accused Collaborators

Antanas Minelkis

Died in November at 80

\* U.S. residence: Gulfport, Fla.

\* U.S. status: Citizenship revoked; deported.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1992

\* U.S. court finding: Private, Lithuanian 2nd Auxiliary Police Service Battalion; served in unit when it executed thousands of Jews in Lithuania and Belarus. Admitted taking truckloads of victims to be shot.

\* Status in Lithuania: Case closed in 1993 due to apparent poor health; no charges filed.

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Juozas Budreika

Died in 1996 at 81

\* U.S. residence: Gulfport, Fla.

\* U.S. status: Citizenship revoked; left U.S. rather than fight deportation.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1996

\* U.S. court finding: Private, Lithuanian 2nd Auxiliary Police Service Battalion; served in unit when it executed thousands of Jews in Lithuania and Belarus.

\* Status in Lithuania: No case opened.

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Juozas Grabauskas, 78

\* U.S. residence: Chicago

\* U.S. status: Citizenship revoked; left U.S. rather than fight deportation.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1993

\* U.S. court finding: Junior lieutenant, Lithuanian 2nd Auxiliary Police Service Battalion; served with unit when it executed thousands of Jews in Lithuania and Belarus.

\* Status in Lithuania: No case opened.

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Aleksandras Lilelkis, 90

\* U.S. residence: Norwood, Mass.

\* U.S. status: Citizenship revoked; left U.S. rather than fight deportation.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1996

\* U.S. court finding: Lithuanian Security Police chief, Vilnius; signed orders transferring Jews in his custody to execution squad.

\* Status in Lithuania: Investigation opened in June 1997; case on hold due to ostensible poor health.

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Kazys Gimzauskas, 89

\* U.S. residence: St. Petersburg, Fla.

\* U.S. status: Citizenship revoked; left U.S. rather than fight deportation.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1993

\* U.S. court finding: Lithuanian Security Police deputy chief, Vilnius; signed orders transferring Jews in his custody to execution squad.

\* Status in Lithuania: Investigation opened in November; case pending

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Adolf Milus, 79

\* U.S. residence: St. Petersburg Beach, Fla.

\* U.S. status: U.S. seeking to revoke citizenship; left voluntarily.

\* Return to Lithuania: 1997

\* U.S. court finding: Alleged Lithuanian Security Police plainclothes officer; allegedly arrested Jews trying to escape Vilnius ghetto. (These are Justic Department’s allegations; a court has yet to rule.)

\* Status in Lithuania: No case opened.

Compiled by Richard C. Paddock from information obtained from U.S. Justice Department’s Office of Special Investigations and Lithuania’s Office of General Prosecutor.