Graves, guilt and genius: Inside Lithuania's struggle with its checkered past

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By Raphael Ahren

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Last month, during a government-sponsored trip to Lithuania, I visited the old Jewish cemetery in Kaunas, the country's second-largest city. I was excited that we managed to spontaneously add an unscheduled stop to our already-jam packed itinerary, but the burial ground's shameful state left me nearly speechless.

If local anti-Semites wanted to vandalize the cemetery, they couldn't possibly make it any worse than it already is: abandoned and neglected, with countless toppled tombstones, some broken into pieces, many lying on the earth overgrown with grass, about to be swallowed by the ground.

The Lithuanian official who accompanied me during my three days in the country must have regretted taking me here. She helplessly looked on as I passed by thousands of dilapidated graves, shaking my head in utter disbelief that a Jewish cemetery in a country that seeks to promote its rich Jewish heritage could be left in such decrepitude.

Lithuania, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, is a small country with limited resources, she told me. We're doing what we can, she repeated, as we walked deeper and deeper into the vast desolation.

A day earlier, at a government office in Vilnius, First Deputy Chancellor Deividas Matulionis had handed me a seven-page document, last updated in June, with talking points regarding Jewish issues. "Restoration works are being carried out in Lithuania's largest cemetery in Zaliakalnis in Kaunas," it stated.

Well, Mr. Matulionis, it doesn't look like it.

And I am not the only one who thinks so. "A popular place for people to walk their dogs and dump their rubbish, this massive burial ground for many of the city's pre-war Jewish elite speaks volumes about local attitudes towards history," according to the In Your Pocket tour guide. The cemetery looks "like the victim of an earthquake," it correctly notes.

For some reason, no wealthy Jewish organization or individual ever undertook to renovate the Zaliakalnis cemetery. By contrast, plans by Vilnius authorities to renovate a run-down sports complex the Soviets built on top of an ancient Jewish cemetery are eliciting vocal protests from activists across the globe (but more about that later).

Dilapidated graves at the old Jewish cemetery in Kaunas, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

The Lithuanian Foreign Ministry probably hoped I would focus on other issues when it invited me to an all-expenses-paid trip, during which I interviewed about two dozen Lithuanians, Jewish and non-Jewish. The powers-that-be would likely wish I'd highlight the government's declared admiration for its large pre-war Jewish community, and its efforts to come clean with its complicated history. And I will, indeed, deal with all that too in this piece.

But like the cemetery, my visit to Lithuania exposed a visible gap between the government's declared intentions and the reality on the ground, where efforts to pay homage to the country's Jewish heritage run up against a hesitancy to deal with its problematic past, including during the Holocaust.

Last year, the Lithuanian parliament unanimously decided to designate 2020 as "Year of the Vilna Gaon and the History of the Jews of Lithuania," marking the 300th birthday of world-famous Torah scholar Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman Kramer.

A monument to the Gaon of Vilna stands near where the Great Synagogue once stood. (Ruth Ellen Gruber/JTA)

Until the Holocaust, Vilnius, or Vilna — known among Ashkenazi Jews as the Jerusalem of Lithuania — was the epicenter of Eastern European Jewish life. When World War II ended in 1945, more than 90 percent of the country's 250,000 Jews had been murdered.

The extent of Lithuanian complicity with the Nazi death machine remains a highly controversial topic, with the current government highlighting the role of locals who saved Jews while downplaying the amount of collaborators.

Of course, the places I was taken to and the people I was introduced to were not chosen randomly but were meant to promote the government's agenda.

For instance Bella Shirin, who was born in Kaunas to Holocaust survivors, moved to Rishon Lezion as a teenager and three years ago regained Lithuanian citizenship and returned to live in her native city. Given her enthusiasm for the city most Jews know as Kovno, the municipality appointed her an "ambassador" ahead of 2022, when it will be celebrated as European Capital of Culture.

Bella Shirin, a Lithuanian-Israeli artist, near her apartment in Kaunas, Lithuania, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

“I love this place,” she gushed over lunch, saying that she has never encountered any anti-Semitism and admires “Lithuanian modesty” as well as the country’s vibrant cultural scene.

Yes, there were a few Lithuanians who helped the Nazis, and some were indeed involved in killing Jews, many of my interlocutors agreed, but by and large, they said, we were victims ourselves. Anti-Semitism existed here once, but today it’s basically extinct. True, there are still some streets named after notorious anti-Semites, but we’re working on it.

Incidentally, just a few days after I returned to Jerusalem, Vilnius authorities removed a street sign and a plaque honoring two alleged Nazi collaborators, in a move historians welcomed as important steps in the right direction.

To the Lithuanians’ credit, they were flexible and allowed several spontaneous changes to the itinerary for my visit; I was encouraged to ask questions, and they did not try to pressure me into writing about any particular issue or to approach a topic from any particular angle.

Still, the impressions I gathered, the inquiries I made and the follow-up interviews I conducted once I returned to Israel left me with certain conclusions, not all of which are flattering to the government in Vilnius.

Modern-day Lithuania, a country of 2.8 million people, is sincere in its embrace of its rich Jewish history (although that may also have to do with PR and tourism related benefits that come along with such an approach). Local Jews have few complaints; anti-Semitism

is marginal. Diplomatic relations with Jerusalem are excellent, nobody here has heard of BDS, the movement to boycott Israel.

The Gaon of Vilna painted on a wall near the former Jewish ghetto of Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

On the other hand, Vilnius, much like Warsaw, Budapest, Kiev and others in the region, still struggles with the right way to remember anti-Soviet so-called freedom fighters who were also Holocaust villains.

More problematic, still, is the government's refusal to face the fact that many — not just a few — Lithuanians were, passively and actively, involved in killing Jews.

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Our first stop, on a Tuesday morning, was the legendary *shulhoyf*, an area that in its heyday included 12 synagogues, several ritual bathhouses and even a small prison (until the 18th century, the Jews here had internal autonomy, which came with extensive powers to the rabbinical courts).

As we arrived, excavations at the site of the Great Synagogue of Vilna, which Jewish community leader Faina Kukliansky called the city's Jewish "acropolis," were in full swing. For the last five summers, the Vilnius municipality, the local Jewish community and Israel's Antiquities Authority have conducted ground-penetrating excavations in the very place where the Gaon of Vilna lived three centuries ago, even though he likely did not worship there himself.

"The thing about the Gaon is that he didn't like publicity in any way," said Jon Seligman, an Israeli archaeologist who oversees the annual excavations. "He didn't like the public in

any particular form. Going to public prayer would not be in his style. Solitude and studying by himself with the very best and brightest students is what he would be involved with."

Archaeologists and volunteers excavate the ritual bathhouses adjacent to the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

After proudly showing us the yellow and red tiles of one of the *mikves*, or ritual bathhouses, that his team had just uncovered, Seligman went on to discussing Israel's responsibility toward Jewish heritage abroad.

"Israel as a state is a successor community of many people who lived in these places," he said, noting that his work in Vilnius is an "expression of that responsibility" and that Israel is eager to promote awareness of and interest in Jewish heritage all over the world.

Two days later, Seligman presided over a press conference during which the excavation's most exciting findings were presented to local and international journalists. It was attended by the head of the country's Jewish community, the Israeli ambassador and senior government officials.

Jon Seligman, director of the Excavations, Surveys and Research Department of the Israel Antiquities Authority, stands at the site where an international team of archaeologists work to unearth parts of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 25, 2018. (AFP Photo/Petras Malukas)

Besides discovering one of the synagogue's four main pillars, which made local headlines, the archaeologists also found a tablet that stood near the table from which the Torah was read for 200 years.

"It's a spectacular find," Seligman said.

The table's inscription, from 1796, sheds light on two Jews, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shmuel, who donated the table in memory of their mother Sarah and their father Chaim, who had moved from Lithuania to Tiberias.

A recently discovered tablet with Hebrew inscription found during excavations at the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

“The inscription is important because it talks about *aliya* to the Holy Land, Israel, and the inscription is one of the first parts of proto-Zionism, which developed here in Lithuania, of the followers of the Gaon of Vilna,” Seligman told the reporters.

Seligman and his team, which consists of local volunteers and senior archaeologists from the US and Israel, also found a cellar underneath the prayer table, the existence of which was hitherto unknown. Inside, they found a small golden plaque from 1539, a prayer book, hundreds of ancient coins, and buttons that belonged to soldiers of Napoleon’s army who passed through the city on their way to Russia in 1812.

The recently discovered pillar and bimah of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

Surprisingly, perhaps, Vilna's Great Synagogue survived the Nazi occupation and was only demolished by the Soviets, who built a kindergarten on its ruins.

This "ugly building" will eventually be torn down, despite the city's lack of kindergartens, Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius said. What will be built in its place is still unclear.

Local Jews are against rebuilding the Great Synagogue, because the community already has one active house of worship, and another one is currently under construction, he explained.

"For them it's very important not to have a fake synagogue. We don't want to have an empty synagogue with no Jews praying in it. But they do want to have a place that could serve as a symbol of a very rich Jewish history in Lithuania."

Indeed, a group of experts on Jewish cultural heritage, which presented its findings during the press conference, said the Great Synagogue "cannot be rebuilt but must be protected as a Jewish heritage, Vilnius cultural and attractive historical site."

Some Jews in Vilnius of course disagree and call for the Great Synagogue to be rebuilt as a place of study and prayer.

Next year, Vilnius plans to hold an international architecture competition to determine the future of the site, Simasius, a former justice minister, told me is his spacious office on the municipality's top floor.

“We’re very sensitive to what the international Jewish community says about this, because many of them have ancestors who were praying in this synagogue. Of course it’s a very sensitive topic,” he said.

Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius in his office, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI

How does he envisage next year’s Gaon of Vilna celebration? “We don’t plan to build any monuments,” he replied. Rather, the municipality is thinking about events to “better educate” the public about the man and his genius, he said. “Many people have heard of him but don’t really know who he was, where and when he lived and what he did.”

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Later that day, I was granted a nearly hour-long on-record interview with Matulionis, the first deputy chancellor who, among other things, holds the government’s Jewish file.

“Lithuanian Jewry was part of Lithuanian society for more than 500 years; it was very active in building up our economy and political system,” he said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s grandparents hailed from Lithuania, he noted.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during a remembrance ceremony at the Paneriai Holocaust Memorial near Vilnius, August 24, 2018 (AFP photo / Petras Malukas)

Anti-Semitism exists but is gradually evaporating, he posited. “Twenty years ago, society was much more poisoned with different stereotypes. Now the situation has completely changed.”

Like other Lithuanian officials I spoke to, Matulionis recalled the 1995 Knesset speech by the country’s first president, Algirdas Brazauskas, who asked for “forgiveness for those Lithuanians who ruthlessly killed, shot, deported and robbed Jews.”

> ‘We’re offended that some Jewish historians make it look like Lithuania is the country where the Holocaust originated’

The government is not whitewashing the fact that “some Lithuanians” participated in the Holocaust between 1941 to 1944, Matulionis insisted. It’s true that “some Lithuanians” participated in the killing of Jews, he allowed, saying the exact number of Nazi collaborators is not known. It was maybe 3,000, he estimated, acknowledging that some put the number somewhat higher.

“We’re offended that some Jewish historians make it look like Lithuania is the country where the Holocaust originated. It’s completely unfair to say that all Lithuanians were anti-Semites and that the Holocaust started here before the Germans entered,” he said.

“The real tragedy was that 95 percent of [Lithuanian] Jews were killed, but there is a misperception; disinformation is being spread from unconfirmed sources that argue that members of the [anti-Soviet] resistance movement equals Holocaust perpetrators.”

Matulionis was primarily referring to Jerusalem-based Efraim Zuroff, the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s top Nazi hunter, and US-born Dovid Katz, the world’s preeminent Yiddish scholar, both of whom are perennial critics of what they consider a revisionist view on Lithuania’s wartime record.

Zuroff told me this week that according to his research “approximately 20,000” Lithuanians were guilty of crimes against Jews during World War II.

This number doesn’t only include the people who pulled the trigger and actually killed Jews — no one denies that several Lithuanian police units carried out mass shootings — but also those who provided the Nazis and their local collaborators with logistical support.

In 2016, Zuroff co-wrote a book about Lithuanian Nazi collaboration with local writer Ruta Vanagaite, for which they visited some 40 sites across the country.

Vanagaite also told me Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust extended far beyond those who physically shot and killed Jews in forest pits.

“First you have to identify the Jews, you have to gather them, you have to cart them, and then you have to distribute their property. So which part of the Holocaust are you talking about? Those people in Lithuanian cities, who commissioned redistribution of Jewish

property while they were still in ghettos, were they part of the Holocaust or not?"

The author of six popular books, Vanagaite, who is not Jewish, has become a very controversial figure in her native country after she cast doubt on the record of Lithuanian partisan leader Adolfas Ramanauskas, a person revered as a national hero.

Although she later partially retracted her contentious comments, she was insulted as a "pro-Putin Jewish whore" and spat at on the street, and her books were removed from stores across Lithuania. Whenever I mentioned her name in talks with Lithuanian officials, they accused her of deliberately lying and badmouthing the country to advance her career.

Vanagaite, who started looking into Lithuanian Holocaust complicity only after she learned that her grandfather, a civil servant, compiled a list of 11 Jews who were later shot to death, currently resides in Israel and is working on a new book about the German occupation of her country.

One of several pits in which the Nazis and their local collaborators shot and killed tens of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust, in Ponary, outside of Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

"The major question is not how many Lithuanians were involved in the killings," she told me. "The real question is: What is the story we teach our children at school? Were they [Nazi collaborators] just a few degenerates, or were they normal people? Were only outcasts participating in the Holocaust — as many or as few as they were — or was Lithuania's so-called normal society also a part of it?"

For Vanagaite, the answer is clear: the Lithuanian government is pushing a false narrative of a small country victimized by both the Nazis and the Soviets, in which a few outliers, regrettably, participated in the Holocaust.

"Lithuania has to face its own trauma, as a country, and not only say what Jews want to hear, which is that, 'Yes, some of us were bad.' But this is not happening," Vanagaite concluded.

Officials in Vilnius dismissed such arguments as misguided efforts by people who built their careers on attacking their country.

“We understand what happened, [but] we will never accept [claims] that there was an orchestrated Lithuanian approach of killings Jews,” Matulionis, the deputy chancellor, said. “Anti-Semitism was part of European history before World War II and Lithuania wasn’t immune. But if it wasn’t for the Nazis, I am sure that the Holocaust would not have happened in Lithuania.”

Lithuanian writer Ruta Vanagaite who co-authored the book “Our People” (Musiskiai) with top Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff during the presentation of their the book in Vilnius, on February 17, 2016. (AFP / Petras Malukas)

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius, in an interview in his Vilnius office two days later, similarly accepted limited individual responsibility for his countrymen’s actions during the Holocaust, but rejected any attempt to incriminate the majority of Lithuanians.

The author, right, with Lithuanian FM Linas Linkevicius, in his Vilnius office, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

Asked if he agrees with the assessment found on the website of Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Center that a “significant part of the murders was carried out by Lithuanian auxiliary forces,” Linkevicius demurred.

“Significant could be read as a majority. And it was not a majority, as far as I know,” he said.

Yehuda Bauer, Israel’s preeminent Holocaust scholar, says he knows it was indeed a majority.

“In Lithuania there are 227 places in which Jews were killed, the large majority of them at the hands of the Lithuanians, even without any presence of the Germans. The whole story that the Lithuanian government tells you is unfounded,” he told me last week in a phone interview.

> ‘There were some Lithuanians, mostly women, who helped Jews, but they were a small minority. The majority of Lithuanian citizens fully cooperated with the Nazis’

“An overwhelming majority of the Lithuanian people, because of the previous Soviet occupation, were very happy that the Germans arrived and collaborated with them in a maximalist fashion,” he said. “It’s clear that most Jews were killed by Lithuanians, under German auspices,” he declared.

Lithuanian officials like to point out that 904 non-Jewish Lithuanians are recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

“These people were really heroes, there’s no doubt about that,” Bauer said. “But they were forced to work against their own people. Because it was very unpopular to help Jews; you could get into very serious trouble. There were some Lithuanians, mostly women, who helped Jews, but they were a small minority. The majority of Lithuanian citizens fully cooperated with the Nazis.”

Lithuania has some “very serious” historians who tell the truth about the country’s wartime record, Bauer said. “But they are not exactly the darlings of the government.”

Nazi killing squad murders Jews from Vilna in the Ponary forest, 1941 (public domain)

Markas Zingeris, a prominent Jewish-Lithuanian author who said he wrote Brazauskas’ famous Knesset speech in 1995, on the other hand, is known to generally back the government’s view on history.

No one is denying the existence of Lithuanian battalions who killed Jews across Eastern Europe, he said. And yet he fails to understand why so many Israeli historians are still so critical of the government in Vilnius.

I met Zingeris at the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, which he used to head and which he now advises on political issues. Nobody from the government curtails his or the museum's freedom of speech, he insisted. "We're open about everything, and I will fight any obfuscation."

I asked him if he feels more Jewish or more Lithuanian. "It's mixed," he replied. "When I see anti-Semitism, I feel Jewish. When I write, I feel Lithuanian."

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In Vilnius, I was introduced to two young Lithuanian filmmakers currently working on the second season of their documentary called "Righteous Among the Nations," which is to be screened on national television.

"We have a lot of them, but we don't talk enough about them. They're dying out," said screenwriter Ruta Vederyte-Macijauskiene. Many famous writers and artists were among those risking their lives to save Jews, she added.

Of course there were also Lithuanians who cooperated with the Nazis, a fact that gets mentioned on the program, they assured me. Neither of them knows how many collaborators there were. "I once heard a Jew from Kaunas tell me that it was easier to kill than to rescue," she said.

I asked them about their own families. Dominykas Kubilius, the series' producer, said his ancestors were sent to Siberia even before the Nazis arrived in Lithuania. They worked for the local government and thus were seen as a threat by the Soviets, he said. But clearly it's a "lie" to say there was no anti-Semitism in Lithuania at the time, he stressed.

Vederyte-Macijauskiene said she did not have a chance to ask her grandparents.

"My mother was born in the 60s. She had nothing to contribute [when I asked her]. We couldn't talk about it during the times of the Soviet occupation [that lasted until 1991]. People were afraid to speak, even with their own families. They were afraid of the neighbors. People were afraid of everything."

Main entrance to the Ghetto of Vilnius in Lithuania, during WWII (Wikimedia Commons – public domain)

Bella Shirin, the Kaunas-born artist who lived most of her lived in Israel but recently returned to Lithuania, said that her parents survived Dachau and Stutthof concentration camps in part because "good Lithuanians" helped them.

"Lithuanians, who were forbidden from helping Jews, are the real heroes," she said. "If I was in their place, what would I do? I'd risk my own life to help, but would I risk my children's life? I asked myself this question very often, but I could never answer it."

The officials I met in Vilnius all mentioned the fact that Lithuania, with 904 recognized rescuers of Jews, outscores Germany in righteousness (Yad Vashem lists 627 Germans Righteous of the Nations). But Bauer, Zuroff and other historians said this comparison is meaningless. They also stressed that Lithuanians who refused to participate in the killing of Jews did not have to fear any consequences.

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At the outbreak of World War II, about a quarter of a million Jews lived in Lithuania; today some 3,000 Jews call the country their home — 0.1 percent of the general population.

And just like any other Jewish community in the world, the Litvaks — as Jews with Lithuanian roots call themselves — have their fair share of infighting, including nasty court battles over money. During my three days in the country, I chose not to delve into these quarrels but to focus on the community's external problems.

> Anti-Semitism existed and will always exist. Sometimes you can feel it, but it's really not what it was during the Soviet period

Even in my interview with Kukliansky, the chairwoman of Lithuania's Jewish community, whose leadership was challenged in court by some of her coreligionists, I opted not to go there. Rather, I asked her what the community's main challenges are today.

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it," she replied. A few seconds later, she answered that there is nothing that particularly worries her.

"We're a small community. What worries us is money, as always," she finally offered, lamenting difficulties in fundraising and distributing the little Holocaust restitution money the community receives. She herself does not receive a penny for her work on behalf of the community, she said.

"We don't have a Jewish kindergarten. And the Jewish school is too small," she added.

If you ask Jewish leaders from France or Germany about their main challenges, they would probably speak about Israel boycotts and rising anti-Semitism. But Kukliansky, whose parents survived the Holocaust in Lithuania, said that nobody here knows about BDS, and Jew hatred has actually decreased since 1991.

"Anti-Semitism existed and will always exist," she said. "Sometimes you can feel it, but it's really not what it was during the Soviet period. Things are getting better."

Rabbi Sholom Krinsky, a US-born Chabad emissary who arrived in Vilnius in 1994, said he has almost never encountered anti-Semitism, although he is clearly recognizable as a Jew.

Rabbi Sholom Krinsky at the Vilnius Choral Synagogue, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

"Growing up in Boston, I often passed by a bunch of kids who yelled 'F– you' at me. This has never happened here in Vilna."

Gercas Zakas, who heads the small Jewish community of Kaunas also doesn't register anti-Semitic sentiments in Lithuanian society, apart from the occasional nasty comment on the internet.

A former professional soccer player, he recalled that for the last 20 years he has been a supervisor of referees, the only Jew holding such a position, and that he never experienced any anti-Semitism.

> ‘Lithuanians should talk about collaboration, Jews should talk about those who rescued Jews’

At this point, his assistant interrupted him, saying that once a coach called him a dirty Jew. But Zakas dismissed her comment, saying that such things happen everywhere. “We need to use common sense. There will always be anti-Semitism, but there’s no danger. There are no attacks on Jews here.”

Sitting in the community’s small office, rented from a local high school, Zakas said that one of his uncles was killed by a Lithuanian during World War II, but that his father never harbored hatred for the Lithuanian nation.

“We cannot say a Lithuanian equals a Jew killer,” he insisted. In fact, he said, Jews should not focus on Lithuanian Holocaust complicity, as such talk only leads to bad blood and confrontation. “Lithuanians should talk about collaboration, Jews should talk about those who rescued Jews.”

Zakas doesn’t speak English and only rudimentary Hebrew, so part of our conversation took place in Yiddish.

Full disclosure: My Yiddish is not very good, and — *oy vey z’mir* — has a distinct Polish hue to it, thanks to my maternal grandparents, who hailed from the other side of the great Yiddish dialect divide. But during my three days in Lithuania I discovered that many Litvaks were nonetheless thrilled to chat in their *mome loshn* (or *lushn*, as Polish Jews would say), and many interviews were conducted in a mix of English, Hebrew and Yiddish.

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Besides Lithuania’s difficulties coming clean about the extent of Holocaust complicity, the other main criticism Jewish historians and activists have of the government is its allegedly ongoing glorification of people who were either notorious anti-Semites, or collaborated with the Nazis, or both.

Many of the country’s heroes were anti-Soviet partisans — or freedom fighters, as they are called here — but some of them were also involved in anti-Jewish agitation and even atrocities.

Two of the more egregious cases were a Vilnius street named after wartime diplomat and Hitler ally Kazys Skirpa, and a plaque of Nazi collaborator Jonas Noreika at the entrance to the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences.

For years, local and international activists said a self-respecting country cannot continue to honor these men.

“Does Lithuania have no one of whom to be proud, so that we can only lionize a person famous for his anti-Semitic statements, his vision of a Lithuania free of Jews and his idealization of Hitler’s Germany?” Kukliansky asked in 2016 in a written statement sent to the Vilnius municipality, which was debating the possible renaming of Skirpa Alley.

Nationalists carrying a picture merging Pepe the Frog and Kazys Skirpa during a march in Kaunas, Lithuania, on February 16, 2017. The banner reads: ‘Lithuania will contribute to a new and better European order.’ (Defending History via JTA)

Skirpa “foresaw a free Lithuania without Jews” and fathered the idea of the special battalions that ended up killing thousands of Jews at the Seventh Fort in Kaunas, she argued.

When I met her in her office at the Jewish community center last month, Kukliansky suggested that if the street name is not changed, local Jews might boycott the government’s Gaon of Vilna celebrations planned for 2020. “Let’s see. If nothing changes, we’ll [only] do a small celebration for our community, as a sort of protest,” she said.

Noreika, who Kukliansky says established the ghetto in which her mother was imprisoned, is not known to have personally killed any Jews, but he “helped implement the Nazis’ final solution,” according to the Lithuanian Jewish community.

Many other local Jews — including those generally apologetic toward the Lithuanian government — expressed discomfort at the fact that their country still honors people like Skirpa and Noreika.

“Who is a hero? That’s the big test for Lithuania today,” veteran Jewish-Lithuanian lawmaker Emanuelis Zingeris told me in the Seimas, the country’s parliament. “Everybody who took part, in any form, in the persecution of their Jewish neighbors cannot be considered a hero.”

Veteran Jewish-Lithuanian MP Emanuelis Zingeris at the Lithuanian parliament in Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

Even partisans who died while heroically fighting the Soviet invaders cannot be role models if they had any role, active, or passive, in collaborating with the Nazi regime, he insisted.

“There’s a huge fight about this question. It’s a fight for Lithuania’s dignity.”

Foreign Minister Linkevicius and other senior politicians are very aware of the problem. “Of course it’s not okay” that a street is named after Skirpa, he told me. But, he added, “It takes time, we’re a democratic country… You cannot over-push, you cannot speed up [this process] more than it’s naturally possible.”

If it were up to him Skirpa Alley would be renamed tomorrow, and the Noreika plaque removed the day after, but it’s not up to him, he said. Rather, the matter needs to be decided by the Vilnius municipality, and while he hoped they would act soon, he could not guarantee anything.

Exactly eight days later, on July 24, Vilnius city council discussed a motion proposing to rename Skirpa Alley as “Tricolor Alley,” in honor of the Lithuanian flag. About a dozen protesters gathered outside city hall urging council members to oppose the proposal, but 21 eventually voted in favor, with 16 against, and one abstention.

“If we want to be glad and proud to have a city that is open and respectful to all people, we can’t display extraordinary signs of respect to someone who said, ‘Let’s take the opportunity to get rid of all

Jews and create an oppressive atmosphere so that they wouldn't even think they could have rights in Lithuania'," Mayor Simasius said immediately after the vote.

Stanislovas Tomas smashes the plaque honoring Jonas Noreika in Vilnius, Lithuania, April 7, 2019 (Screen grab via Facebook)

"We still don't know the concrete time when the sign will be changed, but it will be changed as soon as all the technical questions will be solved," Aleksandras Zubriakovas, an advisor to the mayor, told me last week.

Four days later, early on a Saturday morning, Simasius took another courageous step and had the plaque honoring Noreika removed. Noreika was involved in "isolating Jews and confiscating their property, thus contributing to conditions for the occupational regime to murder them later," the mayor said in justifying his move.

Accused Nazi collaborator, 'General Storm' Jonas Noreika (Courtesy)

The local Jewish community hailed the two "important" events as "of significance to the cause of historical justice." But it also noted, with considerable discomfort, that many Lithuanians were critical of the developments.

"After reading hundreds of ignorant and rude comments where readers share their opinion of Jews and the Holocaust, the Jewish community is beginning to wonder whether the Lithuanian public is mature enough to celebrate a Year of Jewish History," it said in a statement.

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Of course there were Lithuanians who happily helped the Nazis rid the country of Jews, "but when Jews are calling attention to this, it creates contra — that's natural," Rabbi Krinsky, the Chabad emissary, had told me when I asked him about Skirpa and Noreika.

Speaking to me at the city's Choral Synagogue — the only Jewish house of worship in Vilnius offering daily prayer services — he argued that "bringing Jewish kids back to *Yiddishkeit* [Jewish study and observance] is more important" than heated historical debates. (Chabad generally focuses on religious outreach and tries to stay out of fights with authorities).

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks in Vilnius's Choral Synagogue on August 26, 2018. (Amos Ben-Gershom/GPO)

"It's better to conduct such discussions with the government behind closed doors. When we scream about issues as the Jewish community, it suddenly becomes a 'Jewish issue' and the actual issues get obscured, and emotions get in the way of substantive debate," he said. "Once things become public, it gets harder for them [Lithuanian authorities] to do the right thing."

As a case in point, Rabbi Krinsky cited his behind-the-scenes protest over plans to turn an empty and decrepit sports complex built on the city's historic Jewish cemetery into a state-of-the-art congress center. "I didn't campaign against the government's plans. Instead, I had quiet meetings with people and explained to them my point of view."

I asked him where things stood right now on this issue. "I don't know; in our last meeting the mayor promised me that he's going to look for another venue for the conference hall."

I was previously unaware of this particular controversy, so I asked Dainius Junevicius, a senior official in the Lithuanian foreign ministry who deals with Jewish issues, to fill me in. He sighed, as if he had hoped I would leave Lithuania without finding out about yet another painful issue. Then he handed me a few documents on the matter his office had prepared — in case I'd ask, I presume– and promised to take me there so I could see for myself.

A few hours later, Junevicius and I strolled over to a huge, mostly empty area in Vilnius's central Snipiskes district. All of it used to be the ancient Piramónt cemetery, which was built in the late 16th century. The Gaon of Vilna was buried here, though his grave was moved to another cemetery in 1950.

A few years later, the Snipiskes cemetery was razed, and in 1971 the “Palace of Sports” was built in the very heart of it. In the process, “almost all still-existing graves there were destroyed,” according to the Lithuanian Jewish community.

People walk in an area where decades ago an ancient Jewish cemetery stood, near an abandoned and soon-to-be renovated sports complex the Soviets built in 1971, in central Vilnius, July 2019 (Raphael Ahren/TOI)

Preparing the foundations for the sports complex, the Soviets dug nine meters deep, ruining all the graves underneath the building, Junevicius told me, as we walked up to the currently empty — and frankly quite ugly — building. It’s a tragedy, he said, adding that he used to come here to enjoy himself when he was a student, not having a clue that he was walking on what used to be a cemetery.

As opposed to what Rabbi Krinsky believed, Vilnius is going ahead with the planned renovations, Junevicius said. But only the building itself will be worked on, he emphasized. The area around it, where Jewish graves could still be found, will be left untouched, he vowed.

“Any issue related to the arrangement of the Cemetery site and the organization of the reconstruction works at the Cemetery area will be agreed with the Lithuanian Jewish community and the [London-based] Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, and other authorities,” states the document Junevicius handed me. Work is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2022.

However, there is massive worldwide opposition to the project.

More than a dozen US lawmakers, including Rep. Eliot Engel and Senator Ben Cardin, have publicly protested against the plan.

In a January 2018 letter to the Lithuanian president, Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau said the proposed renovation would "severely damage the remains of the bodies that are found in this holy land." All rabbis he has spoken with are of the opinion that Jewish law strictly forbids any change to the status quo, he wrote.

The Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports, a complex that was shut down a decade ago, is the site of a proposed $25 million conference center. (JTA)

An online petition urging the government to move the planned the convention center project to another site has garnered more than 46,000 signatures.

In April, the European Foundation of Human Rights, a Lithuania-based NGO, filed a lawsuit against the sports complex's planned renovation in a Vilnius court.

Modern-day Lithuania is a work in progress, and whether or not authorities will press ahead with this controversial project is just one of many yardsticks on which to judge the way the country is coping with its checkered past.

Lithuania's new President Gitanas Nauseda, who took office three days before I arrived in Vilnius, on Wednesday commented on the rekindled debate over Skirpa and Noreika, the two freedom fighters disgraced as Nazi collaborators. In a statement posted on his website, he argued that local politicians should not be the ones to decide who's a hero and who's a villain.

Rather, he invited historians, political scientists and cultural heritage professionals to “come together in discussions that would serve as the basis for the formulation of the principles and regulation of a national commemorative policy.” He urged the public to honor a “moratorium” on heated historical debates until such principles have been established.

If past controversies here are any indication, his call will likely go unheeded.