

“My goal is to break the narrative that Lithuania had nothing to do with the Holocaust”



Silvia Kučėnaitė Foti is the author of the book *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I discovered my Grandfather was a War Criminal*. After going through major trauma when discovering her grandfather was not the war hero she heard about but a Nazi collaborator, she started to investigate her grandfather's past. Considering Jewish sources along with the Lithuanian sources Foti questions the Lithuanian official narrative denying any involvement in the Holocaust.

by **Martina Urbinati**

MARTINA URBINATI: You've been working on this book for 20 years. Can you just tell me what convinced you to embark on such a Herculean task? What have been the greatest limitations that you faced during the writing process?

SILVIA KUČĖNAITĖ FOTI: My mother passed away in the year 2000, only 60 years old. On her deathbed, she asked me to write the book she never managed to finish. She had been working on this book about her father Jonas Noreika for 40 years. I grew up always listening to stories about him, about what a wonderful hero he was, how he fought against the Communists. In 1997, I went with my mother to Lithuania, and she received the Cross of the Vytis' from president Algirdas Brazauskas. He was very proud to be standing next to her when she received it.

At that time when I took on the task, I thought I was going to write a book about my grandfather, this wonderful hero. That's what I really thought. I did not know anything about his involvement in the Holocaust.

Once standing in the school named after him in Lithuania, the director mentioned the killings of the Jewish community that were ordered by my grandfather, and I almost fainted on the spot. When I came back to Chicago and talked to a lot of relatives about it, they said that it was communist propaganda. And I believed them for a long time



Silvia Kučėnaitė Foti dedicated 20 years writing the story of her grandfather, Jonas Noreika, known as General Storm in World War II, Lithuania. Although he is still venerated as an anti-Soviet resistance hero, she found evidence of his collaboration with the Nazis. Right: Memorial plaque at the Library of Academy of science in Vilnius.

because I loved my grandfather, even though I never met him. It literally took me almost ten years until I finally got to the point where I wanted to research what happened during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania.

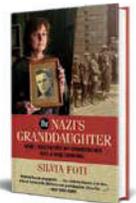
The biggest obstacle that I faced was my own psychological denial over it. When I finally changed my mind, I discovered his anti-Semitic pamphlet *Raise Your Head, Lithuanian*. When I finished reading this, I wanted to burn it because I wanted to protect his reputation. But as a journalist, I knew I couldn't. Later, I also found a document that my grandfather had signed in 1941 while he was district chair of the Šiauliai region, in northwestern Lithuania. Basically, he ordered that all Jews and all "half-Jews" in the whole region to be rounded up and sent to a ghetto that would be created from scratch in the small town of Žagarė on the border with Latvia. It didn't take me long to find out that the holiday known as "Yom Kippur" was purposely chosen to massacre all the 2,000 Jews in that ghetto.

The Nazi's granddaughter took me 20 years to write. Ten years were just taken up with the psychological denial I went through. As part of that process, I did research on his anti-Soviet resistance, whereas in the remaining ten years I was digging into the Holocaust.

MU: Did something eventually change when you started to find evidence of your grandfather's collaboration with the Nazis? Was there a moment when you questioned your identity? Finally, how hard was it to take a critical stand when writing?

SKF: Yes, it was very hard. It was maybe the hardest thing I had to do in my life. Even though I was born in Chicago, I was raised very Catholic, but also very Lithuanian. When I went to Kindergarten I didn't even speak English because that's how the Lithuanian community was. They wanted to inculcate their children to speak the language and to feel this patriotism before they even went to an American school.

It was so hard. I almost went into a little crisis over it. It felt like a huge betrayal to me. I saw that it was not just my grandfather: Even though my book is just about my grandfather, he was not the only one. Then I started putting the picture together and then I got angry at Lithuania for lying. And I began to sense that it was an intentional lie because they wanted to protect their reputation. It's better to look like you're just the victim than also to be a victimizer. So, I said to myself that it was about time to write the best story I could.



The Nazi's Granddaughter. How I discovered my Grandfather was a War Criminal (Regnery History, 2021, 376 pages).

MU: Are you afraid of being heavily criticized for the subject of your work? Or was this part of your aim?

SKF: The worst part for me was going through my own denial; then of course I know that others are going to go through it. Nevertheless, I think my book is practically unassailable. Besides being very careful with my research, I had to get a degree in creative non-fiction because I did not want to just assemble facts. I wanted to create a narrative that would really draw a reader into understanding what happened. I tried to combine the Jewish and the Lithuanian narratives into one, considering all the Jewish sources along with the Lithuanian sources. And when I put them side by side, I soon realized that the Jewish sources were much stronger.

MU: How important was the role of Lithuanian Jews' testimonies for your work?

SKF: It was everything. I found one relative who was ten years old at the time. Thanks to her account, I discovered that my grandfather took over a home previously owned by Jews and moved his entire family into it. That memory she had was like the last piece of the puzzle. I had assembled a lot of other information by then: let me tell you this anecdote.

Here in Chicago, I have a really good friend who was a journalist for *The Chicago Sun Times* and is Jewish. I had been telling him about this project since the nineties. He knew me even before I discovered the whole Holocaust side of the story. In the year 2013, which was the year I decided to go to Lithuania to conduct my research, he told me about his recent Holocaust tour experience, which I found very moving. A few days later, I called him back with the idea of asking his Holocaust tour guide to take me to the places where my grandfather was involved in killing Jews.

When I contacted the Holocaust guide in Lithuania, who was the director of the Sugihara museum² in Kaunas, at first he did not want to do it because I think he felt uncomfortable. After a few weeks he contacted me again and accepted: indeed, he was very instrumental in giving me the Jewish perspective.

MU: As for today, how did Lithuanian authorities react to Lithuanian Jews who asked to end the celebration of Noreika as a hero? Do you think that such request was welcomed or pushed back?

SKF: I think there has been a lot of push back. Grant Gochin, a Lithuanian Jew living in California, has launched a lawsuit against the Genocide Center of Lithuania, which is like the historical remembrance Institute of Lithuania in charge of preserving my grandfather's heroic memory.

He had gone through every single possible court in Lithuania, and they all ruled against it. Now he has just filed a lawsuit to the European Court of Human Rights, and we have already combined forces on this for three years.

At the same time, the Genocide Center is having trouble because more and more historians are now rebelling against it. It was based on their research that they lifted up my grandfather's anticommunist side and they completely overlooked or ignored what happened in the Holocaust. There has been a lot of pushback by the nationalists, but I think more Lithuanians are now willing to look at what happened in the Holocaust with some honesty.

MU: Was there a specific historical moment when Noreika started to be celebrated as a hero?

SKF: During WWII, he led a rebellion against the second invasion of the communists in Lithuania. He tried to unify all the partisans, but in the end, he did not succeed. His bravery was the reason for which he was initially celebrated. He was soon caught by the KGB and spent over a year in jail, until he was executed in 1947. As part of the Soviet Union, no Lithuanian heroes were allowed. Another major problem was that the Soviet Union would not count Jewish deaths in the Holocaust; they called them Soviet citizens. That also contributed to masking the Holocaust in Lithuania. So going to your original question, my grandfather was resurrected as a hero after Lithuania's independence in 1990 as a nation-building strategy: the patriotic narrative prevailed in the general euphoria of that time.

MU: Do you think that your book will create a new momentum for the reconfiguration of the WWII collective memory? Or on the contrary, is there something else that needs to happen in order to open a dialogue about Lithuania's memory of the Holocaust?

SKF: I do think that the book will help. My goal at this point is to break the narrative that Lithuania had nothing to do with the Holocaust. Again, my goal is to help Lithuanians to come to terms with their dark history. They did not even have a chance to do that, because Lithuania was subjugated under communist rule for those 50 years.

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The historical Jewish quarters of Naujoji Žagarė (New Žagarė) in Joniskis district in Šiauliai county. Noreika was appointed governor of the Šiauliai district in August 3, 1941. He issued orders on sending all the Jews of the district to ghettos and on the confiscation and distribution of their property.

So I'm hoping that my book will contribute to Lithuania following the example of other democratic European nations.

MU: In your opinion, is it possible to create a comprehensive understanding (and not conflicting) memory within society?

SKF: It's possible, but people have to be willing to reconstruct, which is what I did in my book. I only did it for Jonas Noreika, so others have to do it for the rest of the country. I took the Jewish perspective and the Lithuanian perspective on equal terms, whereas I think in Lithuania they only gave the Lithuanian perspective priority and almost discounted the Jewish viewpoint.

MU: Your experience and your work are absolutely fascinating and will inevitably inspire current and future generations to question official narratives of the past. To conclude our interview, I would like you to share a message with memory researchers or more generally any young person who might be tempted to investigate his/her own family's personal history.

SKF: I don't know ... be very careful. It is not just looking at the historical facts, but more of an expansion of my heart. It is quite easy to look at the heroic side of history; conversely, it is not so much fun when you come across horrible events in which your ancestors were involved. It does sort of affect your own identity. My faith has helped me the most, as well as my journalism training. ❌

Martina Urbinati holds a MA in Social Sciences at the University of Bologna and was a trainee at the Centre of East European and International Studies (ZOIS). Martina's main research interests include urban memory and conflicting interpretations of the historical past in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States.

references

- 1 The Order of the Cross of Vytyis is a Lithuanian presidential award conferred for heroic defence of Lithuania's freedom and independence.
- 2 Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat. He was appointed vice-consul of the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas (interwar capital of Lithuania until the Soviet annexation) in 1939. During his service, he provided hand-written visas to Polish and Lithuanian Jews, eventually saving thousand lives. For more information, see: Sugihara, Y., Sugihara, H., & Silver, L. (1995), *Visas for life*. South San Francisco, CA: Edu-Comm. Plus.