

## *Detached Holocaust Memory: The Lithuanian-American Community's View of the Holocaust in the First Decades after the Second World War<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract.** In the decades immediately following the Second World War, the Lithuanian-American community in the United States exhibited a complex and often contentious relationship with Holocaust memory, characterised by divergent interpretations of Jewish-Lithuanian relations and events during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania. This complexity arose largely due to the heterogeneous nature of the diaspora, combining earlier waves of economic migrants with postwar refugees who directly experienced the trauma of wartime violence and Soviet occupation. The earlier migrants viewed Lithuanian Jews primarily through the lens of localised coexistence, without first-hand knowledge of wartime atrocities, whereas postwar immigrants' perspectives were shaped by direct exposure to both Lithuanian independence and the atrocities of the Holocaust. Initially, Holocaust discourse in this community was fragmented and reactive, emerging mainly in response to the testimonies of Jewish survivors, rather than from introspective community dialogue. From the late 1940s, Lithuanian-American newspapers revealed a significant ideological polarisation, from cautious attempts at reconciliation to aggressive ethno-nationalist deflections of Lithuanian complicity. Unpublished literary manuscripts by Lithuanian émigrés, preserved in diaspora archives, further demonstrate the nuanced ways Lithuanian-American writers approached these traumatic memories, ranging from empathy and moral reckoning to antisemitic stereotypes and ideological defensiveness. This paper investigates early Lithuanian-American narratives about the Holocaust, highlighting the notable tension between acknowledging Jewish suffering and preserving Lithuanian national identity, often constructed through narratives of collective victimhood under Soviet rule. Through an analysis of press material and émigré literature, this study identifies an initial reluctance to confront complicity alongside early forms of the preservation of cultural memory, reflecting broader East European trends in postwar Holocaust representation. Ultimately, the analysis

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underscores how the Lithuanian-American Holocaust memory was less an internal reckoning than a negotiation shaped by external pressures and competing historical narratives.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; Jewish history; Lithuanian literature; Lithuanian-American community; diaspora memory; trauma

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Lithuanian-American community did not, and arguably could not, establish a unified position on the experiences of Lithuanian Jews during the interwar period, or on the events of the Holocaust in Lithuania. This diversity of perspective is largely attributable to the dynamic and evolving composition of the community in the immediate postwar decades. In the first decade following the war, the Lithuanian-American community underwent a rapid and substantial transformation. On one hand, it expanded and became more active due to the influx of displaced people from Europe, many of whom were political refugees fleeing the Soviet occupation. On the other hand, the social structure of the community also changed. Earlier waves of Lithuanian immigrants, arriving in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, consisted primarily of economic migrants and their families. Although this earlier group did include cultural figures, intellectuals and political activists, their main prewar concern with regard to Lithuania had been economic support for the newly established nation state (Eidintas 2021). In contrast, the postwar wave of immigrants brought with them new experiences and concerns, shaped by direct encounters with wartime and occupation-era violence. The trauma of the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet occupation shifted the focus diaspora's identity formation away from material support for the homeland towards the preservation of Lithuanian cultural heritage, language, traditions and memory, which today would be described as safeguarding the national identity.

These factors also shaped the differing relationships with Lithuania's Jewish population. The earlier Lithuanian-American immigrants could only recall Jews as co-inhabitants of their local regions rather than as fellow citizens, a civic status that Lithuanian Jews only formally acquired after the proclamation of Lithuania's independence in 1918. Moreover, this group had no direct knowledge of what had transpired during the Holocaust in Lithuania. In contrast, the postwar immigrant generation had direct and often complex relationships with Jews during the First Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940), and, more significantly, direct experience of the Holocaust.

During the first two decades after the war, historical scholarship on the Holocaust had not yet been developed, not only by the Lithuanians but also more broadly, and it could be argued that the Holocaust was not yet fully conceptualised as a historical phenomenon (Young 1988). The main written accounts that addressed the Holocaust during this period were *yizkor* (memorial) books compiled by Jewish survivors within their communities. However, due to linguistic barriers (these texts were usually written in Yiddish or Hebrew), it is unlikely that they reached Lithuanian émigré communities in the United States immediately, or that they were intended for that audience. Rather, they were designed for internal Jewish communal memory (Ofer 2000: 24–55). In Soviet Lithuania, the first attempts to study the Holocaust emerged only in the early 1960s, primarily within the framework of criminal proceedings against Nazi collaborators.<sup>2</sup> These trials occasionally attracted attention in the Lithuanian-American press, contributing to the diaspora's awareness of Holocaust-related events (Stončius 2023: 66–94). Systematic Holocaust scholarship began in the United States at around the same time, notably with Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961 [1985]), which laid the foundations for a more comprehensive analytical approach to the Holocaust as a planned occurrence.

This article seeks to examine the forms of knowledge and interpretation of Holocaust events that circulated specifically during the first postwar decades, before discussions of the Holocaust<sup>3</sup> became entangled with the particular political dynamics of the Lithuanian diaspora in the United States, both relating to the search by the Soviet authorities for Nazi war criminals in the Lithuanian diaspora abroad, and relating to the later establishment of the OSI (Žemaitytė 2012: 74–81). The article examines Lithuanian-American press material from the late 1940s, along with fiction and ego-documentary sketches written during the same period, in order to reconstruct the foundational elements of the early narrative about the Holocaust as it developed in the émigré community. Key features that distinguish this earlier phase of knowledge from

<sup>2</sup> A series of case studies first appeared under the Facts Accuse project (Vilnius, 1960–1966), and later selected documents relating to Nazi trials in Soviet Lithuania were published: Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje 1941–1944. Dokumentų rinkinys, Vilnius, 1965, d. 1, 1973, d. 2.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the term 'the Holocaust', referring to the mass murder of Jews during the Second World War, was not broadly used during the first decades after the war, either in Lithuanian-American or in other circles. However, the term is used in this article as a universally understood and accepted concept referring to the mass murder of Jews during the war.

later periods are its relatively ego-documentary nature, and its reliance on oral transmission, knowledge passed by word of mouth.

It is important to note that these novels (with the exception of *Izaokas* by Antanas Škėma (Škėma 2018)), written by Lithuanian émigré authors in the United States during the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, works that directly addressed Lithuanian-Jewish relations in interwar Lithuania and the history of the Holocaust, ultimately remained unpublished. The manuscripts are now in the extensive archives of the Lithuanian diaspora archive in Chicago,<sup>4</sup> preserved among numerous other submissions received over the decades by the Lithuanian-American Writers' Union. While it is difficult to determine whether their non-publication was the result of the thematic sensitivity surrounding the Holocaust, or an overabundance of aspiring émigré authors and limited publishing resources, or even a lack of literary merit, the fact remains that, unlike essays published in émigré newspapers and magazines, these novels did not enter the public discourse of the time. Although unpublished and absent from the public discourse, these émigré novels, preserved in manuscript form, constitute a significant and underexplored source for understanding Lithuanian-American reflections on the Holocaust. They give access to alternative narratives and emotional registers. The manuscripts frequently deal with morally complex themes: the ambivalence or complicity in the Holocaust of the local population, the fragmentation of Jewish-Lithuanian relations, and the psychological burden of witnessing or surviving violence. In some cases, they attempt to reconstruct the world of prewar Jewish communities in Lithuania, embedding personal memory within fictional frameworks. In others, they reveal the tensions between national loyalty and ethical reckoning. These writings are not only repositories of narrative experimentation and trauma processing, they could also be considered artefacts of cultural memory management (Assmann and Shortt 2012: 1–20).

### Negotiating memory and responsibility: the emergence of the question of the Holocaust in the Lithuanian-American public discourse in the first decades after the war

By 1948–1949, the question of Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust had entered public discourse in the Lithuanian-American diaspora, prompting divergent and ideologically charged responses in the émigré press. In January

<sup>4</sup> Lituanistikos tyrimo ir studijų centras/Pasaulio lietuvių archyvas Čikagoje (the Lithuanian Research and Study Centre/Lithuanian Diaspora Archive in Chicago, LTSC/PLA).

1949, the socialist-leaning Lithuanian newspaper *Keleivis* published an article entitled “Ar lietuviai šaudė žydus?” (Did Lithuanians Shoot Jews?).<sup>5</sup> The formulation of the title itself, posed as a question, suggests that the issue was already circulating as a matter of concern and debate among Lithuanian immigrants in the United States. Although the article ultimately avoids full responsibility by framing Jewish accusations as rumour, and reducing Lithuanian participation to isolated morally deviant individuals, it does not deny the fact that some Lithuanians took part in the killings. The piece explicitly acknowledges that there were Lithuanians “who, drunk on Hitlerite liquor and sold out for worthless marks, under the occupier’s command, engaged in legalised banditry”.<sup>6</sup> Still, it places the main blame on the Nazi occupiers, and stresses that, lacking statehood at the time, Lithuania cannot collectively bear responsibility. To reinforce this position, it highlights the relatively favourable conditions Jews enjoyed under the interwar Republic, presenting this as evidence of Lithuanian goodwill.

In stark contrast, the Catholic-oriented weekly *Draugas* published a response the very next day entitled “Patys muša – patys rėkia” (They Themselves Hit, and They Themselves Scream),<sup>7</sup> which adopts a far more aggressive and defensive stance. The article attacks Jewish survivors’ postwar testimony as inflammatory and unjustified, accusing Jews of generating antisemitism, and portraying them as privileged and economically dominant in interwar Lithuania. *Draugas* omits any reference to the deportation of Lithuanian Jews to Siberia in 1941, a detail that *Keleivis* mentioned in the context of shared suffering, and instead depicts Jews not as victims but as collaborators in Soviet repression. This narrative introduces a clear logical inconsistency: Jews in the First Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940) are portrayed both as the primary owners of nearly all shops, factories and workshops, and simultaneously as the main collaborators in the Soviet nationalisation of these enterprises in Lithuania in 1940 and 1941. Furthermore, it emphasises that despite these alleged transgressions, Lithuanians actively engaged in rescuing Jews during the Nazi occupation.

The divergence of the two newspapers is not only rhetorical but also ideological, reflecting a broader fragmentation in the Lithuanian émigré community. *Keleivis*, with its socialist roots, approaches the question of Lithuanian-Jewish relations with a tone of measured reflection and cautious reconciliation. In contrast, *Draugas* assumes a more defensive, accusatory posture, rooted in

<sup>5</sup> “Ar lietuviai šaudė žydus?” – *Keleivis*, 5 January 1949, 1 (5).

<sup>6</sup> “Ar lietuviai šaudė žydus?” – *Keleivis*, 5 January 1949, 1 (5).

<sup>7</sup> “Patys muša – patys rėkia” – *Draugas*, 6 January 1949, 4 (2).

ethno-nationalist logic. Where *Keleivis* implicitly opens the door to dialogue, *Draugas* lists demands placed on Jews, including calls for them not to obstruct the emigration of other displaced persons, so-called ‘true Lithuanians’, a point which reveals the unspoken competition for US immigration quotas between refugee groups in the aftermath of the Second World War (Marrus 1985: 331–332).

These early press debates show that discussions of the Holocaust among Lithuanian Americans did not emerge organically but were largely reactive, prompted by the increasing visibility of Holocaust survivors in American-Jewish public life and their testimonies about the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry. The term ‘displaced persons’ (DPs), applied to both Jewish and non-Jewish refugees, created a shared legal category that concealed deeper divisions in the historical experience and narrative authority. For some Lithuanian émigrés, public Jewish accusations of Lithuanian involvement in the Holocaust were not only painful but also perceived as a political threat to national honour and postwar immigration legitimacy.

Later that year, *Naujienos*, another Lithuanian-American newspaper, struck a more conciliatory tone. (Šalna 1949) ) While also attempting to minimise Lithuanian involvement by characterising collaborators as marginal social outcasts, “drunkards and morally suspect individuals from Vilijampolė”,<sup>8</sup> it acknowledged the historical reality of Jewish persecution. The piece emphasised longstanding inter-ethnic coexistence and stressed Lithuanian efforts to rescue Jews during the Nazi occupation. Although partial and defensive, the rhetoric of *Naujienos* was at least oriented towards reconciliation and future cooperation, in contrast with the combative position taken by *Draugas*.

This discursive spectrum, ranging from the soft apologetics of *Keleivis*, to the aggressive deflection of *Draugas*, to moderated dialogue of *Naujienos*, illustrates the contested and conditional nature of the memory of the Holocaust in the Lithuanian-American diaspora. These early postwar writings also confirm a broader pattern observed in other East European émigré communities: acknowledgment of the Holocaust was shaped less by introspective reckoning than by external pressure, and narratives of Jewish suffering were often subordinate to competing claims for national victimhood under Soviet rule (Assmann and Clift 2016). These rhetorical strategies not only reflect anxieties about historical responsibility, but also refer to the structural difficulty of reconciling the ethno-nationalist identity with the inclusive civic framework required for memory of the Holocaust to take root in diaspora discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## The fictional recreation of the Jewish communist image in the Lithuanian-American diaspora

Lithuanian-American fiction offers a unique lens through which to observe the shifting dynamics of Lithuanian attitudes towards Jewish history, revealing a dual relationship of both inclusion and distancing that unfolded across successive waves of immigration. One particularly telling example is an unpublished play by an anonymous author, called *Lietuviškas cicilikas* (*The Lithuanian Commie*), which remains in the archives of the Lithuanian American Writers' Union.<sup>9</sup> While the exact date of its composition is unknown, the language, idioms and references suggest that it was either written before the Second World War, or it was written by an author who emigrated to the United States before the war. The play tells the humorous story of a Lithuanian character who hires a Jew to help fend off another Lithuanian, a persistent communist agitator referred to by the colloquial and pejorative term *cicilikas* (from a Yiddish-influenced Lithuanian slang word for a communist). Although the Jewish character is portrayed according to folkloric stereotypes as timid and physically weak, he is not depicted with hostility. Rather, his role appears to be constructed through a lens of ethnic humour and cultural familiarity. The real antagonist in the play is not the Jew but the Lithuanian communist, marking an implicit alignment of the Jewish character and the 'traditional' or 'non-radical' Lithuanian protagonist. What is notable is the author's incorporation of Yiddish phrases and references to Jewish religious traditions, food and customs, all woven into the Lithuanian-language dialogue. This signals a degree of cultural proximity and shared social space between Jews and Lithuanians in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century (Staliūnas et al. 2012), something that was still accessible to earlier émigrés who had lived in multi-ethnic environments.

The portrayal stands in contrast to postwar Lithuanian-American literary works that engage Jewish characters primarily through the prism of political ideology, particularly by reinforcing the trope of the 'Jewish communist'. In these narratives, which began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish characters are less often imagined as neighbours or cultural interlocutors and are more frequently positioned in narratives of betrayal or complicity with Soviet repression (Senderovich 2015: 98–132). These works often reflect the broader trend in postwar East European émigré communities, where Jewish memory and the Holocaust were refracted through Cold War binaries and the national trauma

<sup>9</sup> Unknown author, *Lietuviškas Cicilikas*, LTSC/PLA, Rankraščių bylos, Nežinomi autoriai. d. 1. l. 17.

discourse. In this context, *Lietuviškas cicilikas* emerges as an archival artefact of significant interpretative value. It captures a moment in the diaspora's literary imagination in which Jewish-Lithuanian relations were still framed around familiarity, humour and coexistence, rather than conflict and ideological suspicion. The absence of references to the Holocaust in the play, whether due to its prewar composition or its authorial position, further reinforces its historical placement at a transitional point between multicultural memory and postwar nationalised narratives.

Among the postwar Lithuanian-American literary works that address Jewish-Lithuanian relations, particularly those in which the figure of the Jewish communist is central, is an anonymous manuscript entitled *Žydas Lietuvoje ir jo likimas* (*The Jew in Lithuania and His Fate*).<sup>10</sup> This could be labelled more as an egodocumentary sketch than fiction *per se*, and it is one of the few earlier cases in which the focus is specifically on Jewish history and Lithuanian-Jewish relations, rather than addressing these issues only as secondary themes within a broader discourse. Although the text is not dated, internal references suggest that it was written shortly after the Second World War. The narrative discusses wartime events and mentions that the author composed the work from memory in difficult conditions, recalling "the final years of the existence of independent Lithuania". (ibid.) The manuscript is characterised by a pervasive negative portrayal of Jewish life in Lithuania, reflecting an antisemitic sentiment that generalises the experiences of all Jews. It includes statements such as "Lithuanians were indeed repulsed by the public morality of the Jewish community" (ibid.), "Lithuanian perceptions of Jewish sexual morality were publicly abject" (ibid.) and "the Jewish merchant who did not cheat was regarded as a non-Jewish type." (ibid.) According to the author, such representations were justified by the strained relations between Lithuanians and Jews, noting that "for all these reasons, Lithuanian society neither liked nor respected Jews." (ibid.) Concurrently, the author repeatedly asserts that Jews had prospered in Lithuania until the Nazi occupation, a claim that finds resonance in the mentioned contemporary Lithuanian-American writings in the press. This raises the critical question of what the author meant by a 'prosperous life' for Jews, if, as claimed, they were universally disdained by society. The notion of prosperity in this context probably refers to an imagined state of financial well-being, which does not align with historical reality. In interwar Eastern Europe, only a small proportion of Jews, and indeed members of other ethnic groups, enjoyed financial stability, while the majority lived in conditions of relative

<sup>10</sup> Unknown author, *Žydas Lietuvoje ir jo likimas*, LTSC/PLA, Rankraščių bylos, Nežinomų autorių rankraščiai, d. 2 (the manuscript pages are not numbered).



poverty. (ibid.) The author examines the complex relationship between Jews and Lithuanians during the Second World War, asserting that “Lithuanian Jews publicly revealed themselves as true enemies of Lithuania during the Bolshevik occupation of 1940–1941.” (ibid.) He characterises Jews as “the most refined sadists of them all”. (ibid.) Positioning himself as a bystander to the Nazi atrocities against Jews during the occupation, the author argues that it was not Lithuanians who failed to rescue Jews; rather, he contends that Jews lacked the courage to seek assistance from Lithuanians, due to feelings of guilt for their actions during the Soviet occupation. The author denies Lithuanian complicity in the atrocities, specifically referencing the mass murders at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas, which he claims “were conducted solely by Germans with the assistance of Russian prisoners of war”. (ibid.) This interpretation of Lithuanian attitudes towards Jews, along with perceived Jewish self-inflicted guilt, underscores the postwar trauma experienced by Lithuanians, who viewed themselves primarily as victims of the oppressive Soviet regime, and less so of the Nazi regime. Consequently, they struggled to reconcile their identity as victims with the possibility of being seen as perpetrators (Gailienė 2021).

Two unpublished novels by Liudas Zeikus, *Prašau, generole!* (*Permission, General!*, 1953) and *Pėdos per laisvę* (*Footprints towards Freedom*, 1955) (ibid.), are yet more examples of the Jewish communist theme in Lithuanian-American writings from the first decade after the war. Zeikus, who fled Lithuania at the end of the Second World War, shortly before the Soviet and Nazi fronts collided, and later emigrated to the United States, portrays a distinctly ideologised vision of interwar Lithuania, shaped by his own displacement and postwar political outlook. Although written after the war, these novels do not address the Holocaust, despite the author’s presumed awareness of the fate of the Lithuanian Jews under Nazi occupation (due to his fleeing Lithuania only at the end of the war). Instead, both works present a narrative centred on the political tensions in interwar Kaunas, following the experiences of the protagonist Vincas Vėtra. Set against the backdrop of clandestine communist activity, the novels depict attempts to recruit idealistic and ‘naive’ Lithuanians into the communist underground, often led, in the narrative, by Jewish characters. One such figure, Mira Goldinaitė, is referred to pejoratively: “It’s that Red Mira Goldinaitė’s fault. A Jewess, of course! No wonder Vėtra despises those who destroy order and undermine the true human being.” (ibid.19)

Throughout these novels, Zeikus combines longstanding antisemitic tropes with the newer postwar image of the Jew-as-communist, a conflation commonly found in the East European nationalist discourse of the Cold War era (Michlic 2007: 1385–176). The tension is not only political, but cast as fundamentally civilisational, framed in religious and ideological terms. As one

character puts it: "Hatred against hatred: if a Jew despises me as a representative of Christian ideology, why should I tolerate him?" (ibid. 20) Stereotypes of Jewish cunning and subversion are blended with classically antisemitic imagery and Cold War anxieties about Marxism. In one scene, a Jewish prisoner, described repeatedly by the diminutive *žydėlis* ('little Jew', a term with derogatory connotations), is portrayed as the oldest and most intellectually arrogant inmate in a political prison: "They brought in a little Jew, sentenced by a military tribunal in 1919 to life for communism ... he was the oldest prisoner in the political wing ... and being a Jew, his 'pride' knew no bounds." (ibid. 52) The same character is later described as highly educated and talkative: "Generally speaking, the little Jew was intelligent and well-read, he bragged about having studied law. He had almost memorised Marx's *Das Capital* and had read all kinds of literature, especially communist texts ... At night, he would often whisper to the spirits of well-known communists."<sup>11</sup> Such portrayals suggest an essential link between 'Jewishness' and communism, insinuating that communist ideology was not only embraced by individual Jews but supported intergenerationally. One passage notes: "The parents knew that both children belonged to the Communist Party and approved of their activities." (ibid. 67)

Zeikus' novels thus participate in a broader discourse of defensive nationalism, in which Lithuanian identity is constructed in opposition to both communism and Jewishness, now collapsed into one. The absence of any references to the Holocaust, despite the temporal proximity of its occurrence and the author's probable awareness, speaks to the silencing of the Holocaust memory in favour of preserving a unified narrative of Lithuanian victimhood under Soviet occupation. In this way, Zeikus' fiction illustrates how diaspora literature could function not only as cultural expression, but also as a mechanism of historical re-narration and ideological defence.

### The complex history of Lithuanian-Jewish relations in the first half of the 20th century in one love story

Written in the early postwar period but never published, the novel *Jie visi vėl susirinko* (*And They All Met Again*)<sup>12</sup> by the pseudonymous Skeveldra (an unknown author) presents a complex literary attempt to navigate Lithuanian-Jewish relations across several historical epochs: the interwar Republic, the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the early postwar years marked by anti-Soviet

<sup>11</sup> Zeikus, Liudas. *Prašau Generole!*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Skeveldra, *Jie visi vėl susirinko*, LTSC/PLA, Rankraščių bylos, Nežinomų autorių rankraščiai, d. 3.

partisan resistance. Narrated from the perspective of Stasys, a Lithuanian protagonist, the novel centres on his patriotic and heroic resistance to successive foreign occupiers. Yet interwoven into the national narrative is a critical subplot: an unfulfilled romantic relationship between Stasys and Iza, a Jewish woman from the Kaunas region. This subplot serves as a powerful vehicle through which the novel explores tensions of identity, belonging and historical memory.

Iza is portrayed as emotionally invested in her Lithuanian homeland, articulating her identity as a Lithuanian Jew, shaped by acculturation and secularisation. She reflects:

Why not me? Haven't my ancestors lived here for generations? Our children were born and died here. Yes, I am a Jewess, but what difference does that make? Over generations, we've become like everyone else. I graduated from a Lithuanian gymnasium and drifted even further from my parents, who still cling to the Jewish language and customs. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I can hardly speak the Jewish language [probably Yiddish] any more. (ibid. 20)

Yet despite her identification as a Lithuanianised Jew, Iza is acutely aware that others, both Lithuanians and Jews alike, continue to perceive her through the lens of her Jewishness. She tells one Lithuanian character: "Your heart lies with your people's girl. I'm merely a castaway from another nation."<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, she feels the pressure of traditional Jewish expectations: "And the sages of the Talmud, still warning, command me to return to my people." (ibid.)

In contrast with the novel's empathetic portrayal of interwar Jewish life, especially as it relates to belonging and identity, the depiction of the first Soviet occupation reverts to ethnic stereotyping, reflecting tropes commonly found in postwar East European nationalist discourse. The narrative offers a generalised and depersonalised portrayal of Jews as opportunistic supporters of Soviet power: "And some of the little Jews in our town showed their true colour, leaping at the chance to take over the co-op, the bank, and other shops that never belonged to them," (ibid. 30) one character claims.

The novel is not entirely one-dimensional. Amid these tropes, several characters articulate a more nuanced reflection on Jewish actions and motivation during the occupation. One passage observes:

True, Ritas remembered the Jews with flowers in Vilnius as the Red Army entered. He also recalled the NKVD officers of Jewish descent who broke his brothers' bones and drove needles under their fingernails. But he also

<sup>13</sup> Skeveldra. *Jie visi vėl susirinko*, 40.

remembered the Jews who cried over lost freedom alongside Lithuanians and later helped others to survive or keep their property. He knew that those who committed crimes were the first to flee with the retreating Soviet army. (ibid. 159–160)

The novel's presumption of foreknowledge about the Holocaust is notable. Several characters articulate the belief that Jews knew in advance what would happen under Nazi occupation: "But you know that when the Germans come, the Jews will face what they faced elsewhere" (ibid. 141), or "And besides, all respectable Jews were warned in advance. Some who understood what might happen left on their own." (ibid. 161) However, this claim of prior knowledge is historically inaccurate, as at the time of Germany's invasion of Lithuania in 1941, the so-called Final Solution had not yet been fully developed or implemented. There could have been prior fears regarding the Nazi policies against Jews, as they were widely known to be violent and dehumanising, including forced labour, confiscation of property and imprisonment, but the systematic mass extermination of Jews, especially through local collaboration, had not yet begun in 1939 and 1940 (Ress 2021). The narrative's implication that the more 'aware' or 'resourceful' Jews had the chance to escape implicitly shifts responsibility away from perpetrators and towards victims, minimising the helplessness and surprise with which most Jews met the Holocaust.

Nonetheless, the recurring suggestion that survival was contingent upon foresight or social cleverness diminishes the lived experience of those who perished, and, by extension, obscures the structural, systematic nature of the Holocaust in Lithuania. In doing so, the narrative reflects a broader trend in postwar Lithuanian-American memory culture of Holocaust memory being acknowledged, but often through individualised empathy rather than structural or collective reckoning, and frequently clouded by narratives of mutual suffering or competing victimhood. This comparison of suffering transcends the events of the Soviet and Nazi occupations during the Second World War, extending instead to the more contemporary circumstances of the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania. The Lithuanian-American newspaper *Keleivis* stresses this parallel by stating: "Hitler in Lithuania also permitted *stribai* [Soviet bandits] to seize Jewish assets, and now the Russians, employing Hitler-like measures, mobilise lackeys and 'riffraff' with criminal proclivities to expropriate the property of deported neighbours."<sup>14</sup> This parallel is not presented in an article specifically addressing the plight of the Lithuanian Jews under Nazi occupation, but is rather referenced in the Weekly News section. This suggests

<sup>14</sup> 'Stribai' in *Keleivis*, 28 September 1949, p. 2.

that there was at least a conceptual public awareness of the events that befell the Lithuanian Jews during the Nazi period.

Despite these troubling elements, the novel by Skeveldra also has moments of moral clarity and empathy. The protagonist Ritas is described as being unable to bear seeing Jews marked with yellow stars: “Ritas, never a fan of any curtailment of human freedom, could not calmly pass by the groups of Jews, men and women, marked with yellow Stars of David on their backs.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the novel’s portrayal of Iza’s survival underscores the selective empathy extended towards Jews. While verbal expressions of compassion are offered to all Jews in dire circumstances, only those who are deemed to have ‘earned’ Lithuanian support through their actions are ultimately rescued. This selective attitude is exemplified when a priest asks: “Where is Iza now? Is she deserving of Lithuanian support?” (ibid. 173) Iza is rescued from the Vilnius ghetto and hidden by a Vilnius University professor whom she had aided during the Soviet occupation by protecting him from deportation to Siberia. And then Lithuanians, having vouched for her on the basis that “she possesses unquestionable merits” (ibid. 173), take further steps to conceal her. During the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania, the rescued Iza joins the partisan resistance, fighting alongside Lithuanians in the forests against Soviet forces, and ultimately meets her end, killed by enemy gunfire.

The example of heroic Iza’s involvement in the partisan resistance is juxtaposed with the behaviour of other Jews towards Lithuanians: “... everyone was whispering again that she had atoned for all the sins of the Jews who had inflicted pain upon the Lithuanians.”<sup>16</sup> In this context, the pain refers to the alleged Jewish contribution to the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania. This narrative, reminiscent of Liudas Zeikus’ novels, reinforces the portrayal of all Jews as adherents of communism, a stereotype that is further accentuated by Iza’s unique experience. From the outset of the novel, Iza asserts her Lithuanian identity, aligning herself with her homeland rather than with an ethnic Jewish identity. However, in the eyes of the Lithuanians, she is only legitimised as ‘one of theirs’ at the end of the novel, following her tragic death: “I may not be logical, but in my eyes and heart, Iza was no longer merely a Jewess [in Lithuanian *žydėlkaitė*, a diminutive form of the word Jewess, often used in a derogatory sense]. She immersed herself entirely in Lithuanian life.” (ibid. 102). This illustrates an understanding whereby there is no space in the Lithuanian

<sup>15</sup> Skeveldra, *Jie visi vėl susirinko*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Skeveldra, *Jie visi vėl susirinko*, 202, LTSC/PLA, Rankraščių bylos, Nežinomų autorių rankraščiai, d. 3.

consciousness for differing ethnic and civic identities, relegating Lithuanian Jews to the status of a foreign element within an ethnically defined Lithuanian space.

### *Škëma's Izaokas* in the context of early Lithuanian-American writing about the Holocaust

An exceptional case in the context of postwar Lithuanian-American fiction addressing Jewish history and the Holocaust is Antanas Škëma's novel *Izaokas* (2018). Although first published only in 1985 in the third volume of Škëma's collected works (Škëma 1985), and even then with difficulty, the novel was written much earlier. Given that Škëma died in 1961, *Izaokas* must have been composed in the 1950s or early 1960s, placing it squarely within the same literary field of postwar 'memory writers' who grappled with the traumas of both totalitarian regimes and moral complicity. This article focuses not on the novel's later reception, but rather on its narrative structure and importance in the context of other Lithuanian-American literary texts written in the 1950s and 1960s that sought to engage, often indirectly, with the Holocaust. *Izaokas* thus belongs to a small but significant corpus of émigré literature that wrestles with the burden of memory before Holocaust historiography had fully emerged as a field or framework.

Although the manuscript of *Izaokas* bears a conventional disclaimer ("All people and events are fictional") and does not claim historical accuracy, the novel's setting and emotional landscape suggest strongly that Škëma drew either from personal experience in Nazi-occupied Kaunas, or from the oral testimonies and public knowledge available at the time. Importantly, the novel predates any comprehensive historical accounts of the Holocaust in Lithuania and therefore functions not as historiography but as an act of moral and psychological enquiry. At the core of the narrative is the self-reflection and psychological torment of a Lithuanian who took part in the mass execution of Jews in the Lietūkis garage massacre in Kaunas in 1941, a crime now widely recognised as one of the earliest and most brutal acts of local collaboration in the Holocaust (Rukšėnas 2021: 37–79). The protagonist later emigrates to the United States, where he is haunted by the memory of his actions and the moral weight of his guilt.

In contrast with other Lithuanian émigré writings of the time, which often externalised responsibility for the Holocaust, or reduced Jewish characters to ideological archetypes, *Izaokas* internalises the trauma and moral failure, presenting a rare instance of guilt-driven introspection in postwar Lithuanian literature (Mačianskaitė 2011: 155–176). Its literary value lies not in offering a

historically complete representation of the Holocaust, but in its early reckoning with the psychological consequences of participation in an atrocity, making it one of the most ethically charged and aesthetically ambitious attempts to confront Holocaust memory in Lithuanian fiction.

Although the episode in *Izaokas* depicting the massacre in the Lietūkis garage is presented from the perspective of personal culpability, incorporating a Lithuanian figure among those involved in the killings of Jews, the massacre itself is portrayed as being organised and predominantly executed by German soldiers: “SS men armed with automatic weapons stood around, silent and attentively tracking the movements of anyone crawling.” (Škėma 2018: 10) Furthermore, the involvement of the Lithuanian Andrius Gluosnis in the killings is justified as a ‘settling of scores’ with a specific Jew who had entered the Lietūkis garage yard, as this Jew had brutally tortured Andrius in prison during the Soviet occupation: “What I am going to do will be an act of revenge.” (Škėma 2018: 15) This narrative perpetuates Holocaust representations where mass Jewish killings are attributed to the Germans, while Lithuanian participation in the atrocities, similar to the case of saving Iza in the novel “And They All Met Again”, is depicted as individual choice. This framing seemingly disconnects Lithuanian actions from the broader ‘massiveness’ of the killings, creating a narrative that emphasises Lithuanian non-involvement in the Holocaust, while portraying individual retaliatory actions against Jews as secondary acts in the context of the Holocaust’s atrocities.

The fact that Škėma wrote the novel at a time when the public discourse about Lithuanian involvement in the crimes of the Holocaust was generally ignored, even by intellectuals, further stresses the novel’s courage and distinctiveness. While *Izaokas* was not published during the author’s lifetime, its existence stands in marked contrast to many contemporaneous works that either erased the Holocaust altogether or substituted moral complexity with ethno-nationalist justifications. As such, *Izaokas* functions not only as a literary artefact, but also as an early and singular voice of diasporic moral reckoning in the Lithuanian-American community. In this sense, *Izaokas* can be viewed as part of what Dominick LaCapra presents as “empathic unsettlement” (LaCapra 1999: 699), a mode of writing that resists closure and compels the audience to confront the emotional dissonance of moral trauma, rather than offering a resolution or ideological comfort.

## Conclusions

The modes of knowledge and discourse about the Holocaust in Lithuania that circulated among Lithuanian-Americans in the early postwar decades not

only reflected initial perspectives on the events, but also contributed to the construction of a particular image of the Holocaust, an image shaped by testimonial fragments and mediated through multiple channels. These included cultural and news publications, fictional narratives (whether published or still in manuscript form), and personal recollections that entered the public domain in fragmented ways. Whether the authors of these early postwar texts witnessed atrocities, heard testimonies, or participated in or resisted violence, their relationship to the Holocaust must have been deeply personal and varied. The phenomenon of 'competitive martyrdom' (Weizman 2022), in which Jewish and non-Jewish sufferings were symbolically opposed rather than integrated, was already evident and leading the narrative in this early Holocaust discourse in the Lithuanian-American community. These fictional works and press publications reflect the deep imprint of the postwar Lithuanian political trauma, particularly the association of the Jewish identity with Bolshevism, a narrative that had circulated in interwar nationalist thought and gained renewed strength in DP (displaced persons) communities in the West. As scholars have shown (Himka 2012: 427–442), such imagery often served to absolve national groups of responsibility for the Holocaust, by redirecting blame towards the Jews themselves, positioning them as agents of Soviet oppression and political corruption. These lived experiences shaped the discourse on Jewish-Lithuanian relations and the Holocaust memory in the diaspora before the Lithuanian-American community had to deal with the topic in the legal and/or the political discourse.

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