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# Defending History

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## Kaunesia: Travelling the Dark Memory Lanes of Kaunas

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by [Adam J. Sacks](#)

It says something that the only “Devil Museum” in the world is to be found in Kaunas, Lithuania. This city sometimes also known as Kovno, is the most Lithuanian of cities, the capital of independent Lithuania in the interwar years, and still today, the more fully Lithuanian when contrasted to the more multicultural current capital of Vilnius. The Russian, Polish, and English languages, for instance, which are fairly common in Vilnius, are nary to be heard in Kaunas. This “Devil’s Museum” is a global and learned collection of 3000 figurines from 70 countries made by a prominent Lithuanian professor and is certainly a landmark and a must-see. The devil is the most dominant figure in Lithuanian folklore. This figure apparently has a thousand names in the ancient Sanskrit-related Lithuanian language, with over 400 places names and 5000 legends featuring this character. While surveying the collection, so many features of these legends pop out: the devil is rich, often a thief, one who pours coins, who controls the vodka trade, imparts powers of virtuosity on the violin, and who even, at times, cooks humans.

In the accompanying notes, one learns that the devil is often depicted as a nobleman, sometimes even as a German. Yet nowhere in the entire museum however is even the word Jew, or Jewish, even mentioned. Needless to say, the physiognomy in the overwhelming majority of the figurines closely matches the hallmarks and the stereotype of the antisemitic rendering of “the Jew.” The characteristic markings could not be more clear: facial features such as the long or hooked nose, thick lips, flaring nostrils, the strangely squat or wiry physique, beady eyes and the deep eyebrow ridges. This figure is also well known, inter alia, from the centuries of representations of Jews per se featured during Lithuania’s end-of-winter, Mardi Gras-like Užgavėnės festival.

These hallmarks of racial stereotyping assigned to the devil but over time projected en masse onto Jews suggest a being only just barely human-adjacent, and one also deeply uncanny and unsettling. Historian Christoph Dieckmann found that “Priests held mass in battalions that shot Jews, telling them to ‘Fight the Devil.’”



**Above: From the Devil Museum in Kaunas. Below: From a recent traditional annual Užgavėnės festival.**

Additionally, all the aforementioned features, the dealing in coins, vodka and violin, were all at times, occupations engaged in largely by Jews during much of the seven century sojourn of the Jews on the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later the Russian Empire, The dissonance between the myriad points of connection and the absence of any mention of the same such is further amplified by the historical *terroir* of Kaunas as a *lieux de memoire* of the Holocaust. An important disclaimer before moving further. Please take the following under advisement as a “historian’s general warning”:

1. Lithuania provided the highest proportional quantity of non-German “willing executioners” of any European country.
2. In dozens of Lithuanian towns, all of the Jews were murdered in the (near) absence of any (Austro)-German executioners whatsoever.
3. Lithuanian killers willingly travelled to other countries to murder Jews.
4. Nazi authorities brought Jews from other countries, notably, Central Europe, to Lithuania to be killed.
5. The LAF (Lithuanian Activist Front) leaflets in the lead-up to the Nazi invasion of 22 June 1941 called for the elimination of all Jews from Lithuania. One circular promised amnesty to criminals who could prove they had killed a Jew.
6. In the days after the Nazi invasion of 22 June 1941, the LAF set up roadblocks around many towns to prevent Jewish flight to the East.
7. The “Provisional Government” set up on 23 June 1941 approved the arrest, deportation to mass murder sites, and the order for ghettoization of Kaunas’s Jews.
8. Kaunas today has more monuments than any city on the planet to genocidal killers and Nazi collaborators (counting street names, plaques, museum exhibits, displays, and more).
9. Priests held mass in battalions that shot Jews, telling them to “Fight the Devil.”

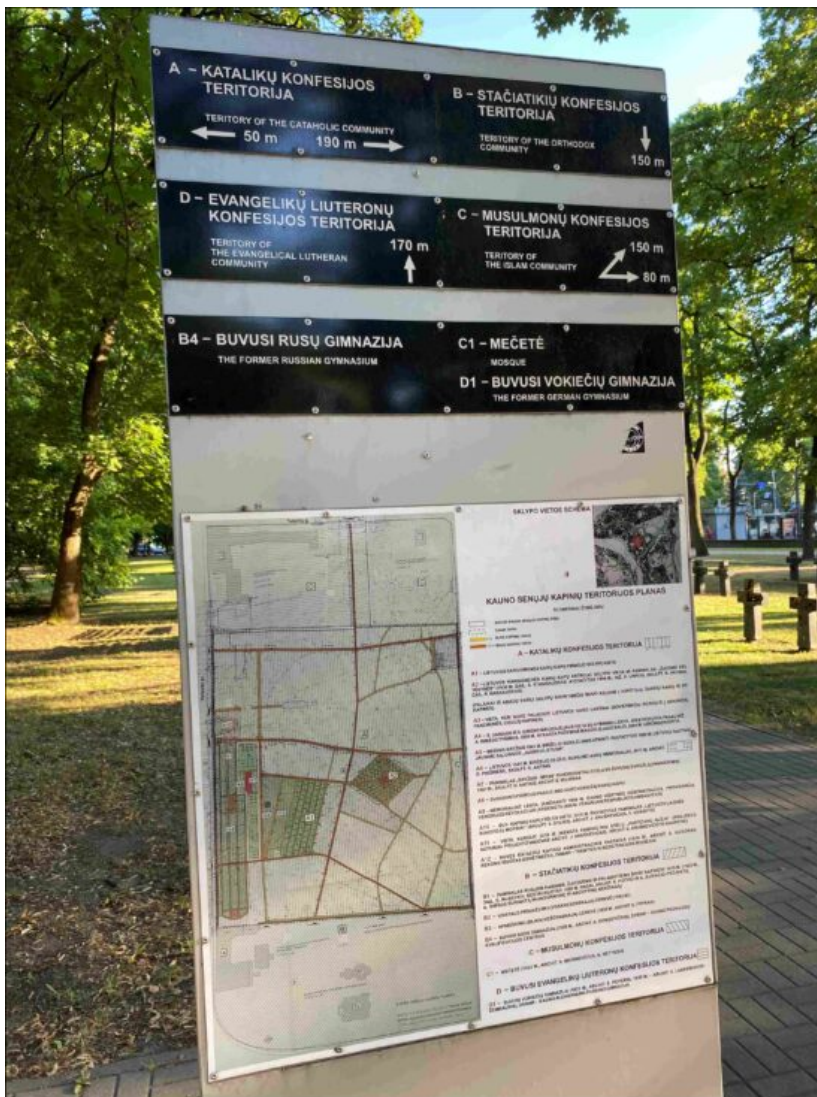
The reader will thus not find it remiss, if the complete and total lack of self-reflection on the national obsession with the devil and antisemitism seems an aching oversight. The urban memorial topography in Kaunas only aggravates this absence. Setting afoot in the city just a few blocks from the museum and it is as if one has landed into a Twilight Zone episode or a glimpse of what life might be like had Robert Harris' dystopian Nazi neo-futurist *Fatherland* become reality. Just off the one and only pedestrian drag of Kaunas, there is a city park dedicated to and featuring a colonnade of crosses each named for a different division of "partisans."



Just adjacent is a house museum bearing the title "resistance and exile." But Yad Vashem or the USHMM this most definitely is not, this is a memorial landscape utterly devoid of any centering of Nazi victims. Quite the opposite in fact, "partisans" here does not indicate heroic fighters behind enemy lines in the forest who refused to sit in the ghettos awaiting death, but rather Lithuanian nationalists who continued the anti-Soviet fight on the Nazi side for many years even after Nazi Germany had given up (some of these were recycled Holocaust perpetrators). Exile refers to the mass deportations under Stalin to Siberia, a crime indeed, but it is worth remembering that of the 10% of Lithuanians who were deported just around 10% perished meaning 1% of the total population. Of the Jewish community under the Nazis, by contrast, just over 3% survived the war.



Right adjacent to "partisan alley," (one is tempted to rechristen it as "revisionist roadway") in the public park is a large informational tablet designed to illustrate the inclusive multicultural diversity that is supposedly a hallmark of Kaunas. Directions are given in meter distance to the Catholic, Lutheran, and Russian sites, "Islam Community," and the German gymnasium. Conspicuously absent is anything in reference to any institutions or landmarks of any Jewish community, strange for a city that was once more than 25% Jewish. (There is still one functioning historic synagogue in the center of the city.)



There is even a graveyard inside a park, with headstones, different sections commemorating various losses of these different communities. For a contemporary Lithuanian nationalist discourse so awash in framing all things Russian as anathema, it was surprising to see a reference to the memorial to Russian soldiers fallen in World War I. The closest I could find to anything Holocaust related was this extremely convoluted circumlocution: “the memorial to the victims of the rebellion against soviet occupation on June 22-28 1941 in Lithuania” though the reference is obviously not to the Jewish victims of the “rebels” themselves.



Even more discomfiting is that just blocks from this park was the site of one of the most infamous massacres of the Holocaust. The massacre at Lietukis Garage, indelibly documented in photographs saw up to seventy Jewish men beaten to death with crow bars or tortured to rupture with hoses. Women and men stood by and clapped, the Lithuanian national anthem was sung as the murderers danced on the pile of corpses. It is difficult to locate the site today, there are hardly any signs, and the memorial is a single stone slab almost hidden under the shade of tree, right next to a heavily trafficked driveway. Stranger still, the words on the stone are entirely illegible, unclear whether they have faded out or arrived difficult to discern.



Distracting and dissonant too is the beach volleyball field just yards away or the full size soccer pitch adjacent to that, both strewn with scantily clad young Lithuanians apparently enjoying their youth undisturbed by the history of the site.



There is one and only consistent reference point to matters Holocaust on Kaunas's memorial landscape and that is the myriad of tributes to the Japanese diplomat Sugihara. There is a plaque that even greets arriving trains at the station, a plaque on his apartment, and his work site preserved as a small museum. (In Vilnius, there is even a Sugihara garden grove right in front of the National Museum of Art.) Sugihara is a

curious case, a Japanese diplomat who during the so-called “phony war” after the invasion of Poland but before the invasion of the Soviet Union, issued visas to refugees fleeing the war zone. Strangely the plaques describing his efforts read *in medias res*, with little context provided: “Mr. Chiune Sugihara continued to issue Visas for Life right up until the point his train departed from Kaunas Station, on September 4th, 1940.”



Visas for Life here is treated as a recognized proper noun, without any further explanation. There are a few complications about hailing Sugihara as a Righteous hero of the Holocaust on Lithuanian soil. First of all the visas he issued were for refugees then under Soviet domination, not those experiencing Nazi oppression. Secondly, he was actually issuing *transit* visas not entry visas, and it was his Dutch colleague Jan Zwartendijk, who in exchange for hefty sums, supplied a stamp in refugee’s passports that a territory under Dutch control did not require a visa. Finally, the promotion of Sugihara is the result of a complex process and campaign of the Japanese state seeking to off-set their own fascist association and implication in Nazi crimes. (The Israeli scholar Rotem Kowner has done excellent work documenting how the cult of Sugihara is based on confused narratives and an incorrect understanding of the source base.) It bears remembering that Japan still resists full acknowledgment and reparation for a myriad of crimes against humanity in the lands of its Asian neighbors during the war.

In Jewish historical memory, Sugihara will forever be linked with the name of the Mir Yeshiva, that largest of all Talmudic academies. (Mir was in interwar Poland, and Lithuania under President Smetona did indeed accept these refugees after the dismemberment of Poland). Most of the Mir student body made it across Russia, to Japan and finally Shanghai thanks to Sugihara visas. Yet nowhere in Lithuania’s veritable cult of Sugihara could I locate any reference to the Mir. Whether due to negligence or thoughtlessness, even where Lithuania could signal a gesture of grace to narratives and perspectives of a bygone Jewish Lithuania amidst the sea of absent memories, somehow they couldn’t be bothered.

Underneath the charming pedestrian pathways of this Capital of European Culture (in 2022) are many alleyways dark with memories and darkened still by the blind spots of amnesia.

◇

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