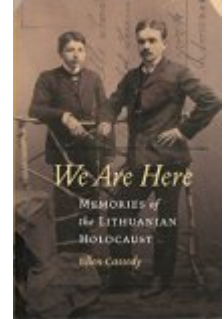


**Ellen Cassedy.** *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. 273 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-3012-5.



**Reviewed by** Laura Levitt

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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Ellen Cassedy's *We Are Here* challenges us to think again about what it means to remember the Holocaust in the present. This is not a book solely about the past but rather an exploration of the challenges posed by any attempt to address this past from the present. And, as such, it confronts the many layers of historical and personal trauma and loss that mark contemporary Lithuania and its people. The book is organized into three sections, each encouraging readers to consider who is included and who is excluded from the “we” in Cassedy’s title. Who is this first person collective in this place? What does it mean for “us” to be in Lithuania in the present? For Cassedy this is a capacious “we.” It includes Jews and non-Jews, Lithuanians and others, those with and those without familial connections to this place both past and present. More specifically, it overtly includes English, Lithuanian, and Yiddish speakers.

The book opens with a prefatory chapter entitled “Preparations” that sets up the structure and the questions that drive Cassedy’s travel narrative. As such, in this chapter, Cassedy explains

what led her to go to Lithuania in the first place, and some of the questions that animated her journey. On the one hand, this is a narrative about language and what it means to return to one’s mother’s tongue, the language of one’s ancestors. On the other hand, this is a story about family secrets and reckoning with a quite specific Holocaust past. After the death of her mother, Cassedy, a secular Jew, decided to learn Yiddish. As she explains, she hopes that this study will enable her “to connect myself with my roots—the Jewish ones, that is, on my mother’s side. (On my father’s side, my non-Jewish forebears hailed from Ireland, England, and Bavaria—hence my name, Cassedy, and my blue eyes and freckles.)” (p. 3) For this writer and journalist, language study is not a casual matter. As we come to appreciate, she is a rigorous and serious student. In fact, it is her determination to learn Yiddish that sends her on this journey to Vilna. She went to Lithuania to take part in an intensive Yiddish institute, an international summer language program offered at the Vilnius University. But alongside, and imbricated

with, this commitment to learning Yiddish is the author's family story. She wanted to understand what happened to her family during the Holocaust. Before leaving for Vilna, Cassedy met with her eighty-year-old uncle, the last of that generation of her family who survived the Holocaust. At this meeting, he revealed to her long hidden truths about how he was able to survive. As we come to learn, he was a Jewish policeman in the Shavl Ghetto. This is a revelation that challenges profoundly the heroic stories that Cassedy had always remembered, the stories told and retold in her family about this man and how he survived. And so she arrived in Vilna with this new knowledge about her uncle and must come to terms with this legacy as well. In Cassedy's text, this is a story about a particular past but self-consciously retold and understood from the perspective of the present. It is a story about returning to the place where Cassedy's family came from in order to better appreciate this new and disturbing knowledge. Part of what Cassedy attempts to capture in her text, stitched between these two quests, is the story of this once vivid Jewish world that no longer exists. She was in Lithuania to mark this profound communal as well as familial loss and to celebrate, as best she can, all that once was of Vilna, the Jerusalem of the North. She did this knowing that this is a place where so few members of this once vibrant community, including her family, have survived. To get at all of this loss from the present, she must also attempt to understand how and why this Jewish past is seemingly so invisible in contemporary Lithuania. She wanted to understand this silence and some of the history that continues to make this so. And, in so doing, she was confronted with some of the other legacies of loss and conquest, deportation, and destruction that have shaped contemporary Lithuanian culture and politics. These other Lithuanians are also very much a part of the "we" that marks her narrative. All of these different twentieth-century legacies are included in the story Cassedy tells. In so doing, she insists that her experience in Lithua-

nia has broader implications. She refuses to engage with the legacy of the Holocaust outside of this broader context. Instead, she offers a model for how other people might confront the many-layered traumatic histories of other places in the world that are also the sites of so much destruction and degradation.

As she explains, she went to Lithuania with the hope of answering some of the following questions: "How do we judge the bystander and the collaborators, the perpetrators, and the rescuers--and ourselves? Where should my sympathies lie in this place where some had killed, some had resisted, and many had suffered? Could I honor my heritage without perpetrating the fears and hatreds of those who came before?" And having laid out these questions, she goes on to explain: "As societies around the globe struggle to recover from war-torn histories the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust will not fade; in fact, they will always be with us. What I hoped to learn in the land of my ancestors could have relevance far beyond the borders of Lithuania. Observing how people in the land of my ancestors were seeking to open the minds and hearts of their fellow citizens might open my own mind and my own heart" (p. 10).

I cite this paragraph in full to note the delicacy of Cassedy's quest and her insistence on drawing connections between her memory work and those of others across the globe. In so doing, Cassedy offers a version of what Michael Rothberg describes as multidirectional memory (*Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* [2009]). Hers is not a text about competing memory, but rather a productive emotional and critical intervention that insists on drawing connections between different legacies of trauma, loss, and oppression without making them into one and the same thing. By refusing the logic of competing oppressions, Cassedy's text insists on holding out a quite modest hope for some understanding. This again is the promise of the "we" in her title.

Unlike many other memoirs about tracing one's family roots, Cassedy refuses to smooth over the difficulty of accessing the past and instead uses her experiences learning Yiddish--the frustrations and the moments of deep understanding--as a way of describing this process. These are similar and parallel stories. As I have already indicated, the family story that she carried with her to Lithuania is itself not simply a story of victimization. Her uncle's efforts to save various members of his family were only part of his story. With Cassedy we come to learn more about her uncle and other Jewish policemen; we learn about various bystanders, perpetrators, and victims; and we learn about Jews and non-Jews, and how all of these acts of remembering are happening and not happening in the present.

Like Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer who returned to Czernowitz in *Ghosts of Home* (2010), Cassedy too makes the contemporary exploration an essential part of her narrative. Through her deft prose, Cassedy does not produce a seamless narrative. Instead, she explores with us the seams and gaps in her story as a way of performing what it means to engage with the past as a partial reckoning. These are broken tales. They require our humility and not our hubris. And what makes this especially difficult for Cassedy is precisely the profound silence around the destruction of Jewish life in contemporary Lithuania and the ways that other traumas seem to overshadow and undermine efforts to appreciate this legacy. Cassedy uses Yiddish literature to convey some of the emotional experience of these explorations. Yiddish texts punctuate the narrative giving weight to her arguments even as they deepen and open up other dimensions of what has been lost. In all of these ways, *We Are Here* helps to recover some semblance of this vibrant cultural past even as it explores, in a more pointed way, a more troubling family legacy and its broader implications.

Contemporary Lithuania is a complicated and often disturbing place to go to explore the past, es-

pecially the Holocaust past. Since Cassedy was in Lithuania in 2004, these issues have become only more charged. In a sense this book may describe a somewhat more hopeful moment. As Cassedy explains in her author's note, "in the time that has passed since the events described in this book," many things have happened that are especially disturbing. In 2005, some of the elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors that Cassedy writes about so lovingly have become subject to investigation "on suspicion that, as anti-Nazi partisans, they might have been guilty of war crimes" (p. 269). And, as she reports, in 2008, 2010, and 2011, neo-Nazi demonstrations have taken place in Lithuania. The struggle Cassedy so eloquently engages in to resist the logic of competing memory may be only that much more urgent today than when she was there.

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