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Local Testimony and the (Un)Silencing of Sexual Violence in Lithuania under German Occupation during WWII

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Abstract: The memory of sexual violence in Eastern Europe under German occupation during WWII has long been silenced by the opacity of local events to outside observers, a conspiracy of silence on the issue of collaboration, and conventions on how the Holocaust should be represented. Since the collapse of the USSR, the opening of archives has stimulated the production of a large and growing literature on the nature and causes of communal violence, but with relatively limited attention to sexual violence as an aspect of genocide. Based on a qualitative analysis of select audio-visual testimonies collected from non-Jewish Lithuanians since the 1990s, this paper demonstrates that local knowledge of sexual violence has persisted for decades in the post-genocidal space. However, these testimonies have been overshadowed by politicized narratives of national martyrology, and neglected by local and international researchers alike, despite their importance to the process of historical reckoning.

Keywords: Holocaust; sexual violence; communal violence; testimony; Lithuania



Citation: Davoliūtė, Violeta. 2021. Local Testimony and the (Un)Silencing of Sexual Violence in Lithuania under German Occupation during WWII. *Humanities* 10: 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040129>

Received: 3 November 2021

Accepted: 13 December 2021

Published: 20 December 2021

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1. Introduction

Several days after the German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941, the Jewish residents of the small town of Darbėnai (Dorbian) in north-west Lithuania were forced out of their homes by German security police and local collaborators. Following a pattern repeated in several other small towns across the country, Jewish men were singled out, taken to the outskirts of the town, and massacred. Those who remained, mostly women and children, were locked in the town's synagogue. From there, some were given to work on local farms, others sent to nearby work camps.¹

Estera Kverelytė (Ester Kverel), a gymnasium student from Darbėnai, was taken in by the family of her best friend, Birutė Japertaitė, the daughter of a local Gentile, Stanislovas Japertas, a musician and member of the local intelligentsia. For the next few weeks, sharing a room with Birutė, Estera kept a diary, recording her thoughts. Several weeks later, she was seized from the Japertas household by another local from Darbėnai, the former mailman, wearing the white armband that German forces distributed to their local collaborators. This young man, well known to locals, was seen taking Estera to a nearby forest, where she was found dead the next day, her body battered and violated (Japertas 2020; Beniušis 2020).

In 1964, Estera's story was featured in a Soviet documentary film entitled *Unfinished Page of a Diary*. The film opens with the voice of a man reading from her diary. The narration hints at her Jewish identity, mentioning her "dark eyes," but the visual plane of the film highlights her neat Lithuanian handwriting and photos of her as a schoolgirl, surrounded by classmates at a secular Lithuanian *gymnasium* in the nearby town of Kretinga. Contemporary critics compared her to Ann Frank (Macaitis 1964). Alluding to her tragic demise but providing no details concerning her fate, the documentary transitions to postwar courtroom scenes of several men confessing to their participation in the mass execution of unarmed civilians, women, and children (Tautrimas 1964).

The film constructs a typical Cold War narrative, in which the hard facts of genocide are spun into the yarn of Soviet solidarity in the face of Western imperialism. The identity

of the alleged perpetrator is positioned outside the local community through the metonymy of the empty chair of the accused ringleader tried in absentia—a Catholic priest who fled the Red Army’s advance and now resides in the USA. The agency and motivation of local perpetrators are glossed over by the label of “bourgeois nationalist” in the progressive narrative of Soviet justice. Leaders of the Lithuanian Communist Party are identified with the people, laying wreaths at a memorial to the victims, bringing closure to the tragedy and opening the door to a better future.

In this Soviet documentary on mass atrocities committed by German forces and local collaborators during WWII, the rape and sexual torture experienced by Estera and an uncounted number of Jewish women and girls across the country is obscured. The particulars of Estera’s identity and fate are less important than the epideictic rhetoric constructing her persona as one of us, the Soviet-Lithuanian people, victimized by them, bourgeois nationalists, fascists, the externalized perpetrator. As explained in the producer’s notes to the state cinema committee, the inclusion of Estera’s story was needed only to establish an emotional backdrop for the subsequent unmasking of the émigré cleric as an enemy of the Soviet people and state (*State Committee 1964*). The silencing of sexual violence in representations of war has long been the norm, with the notable exception of atrocity propaganda, which exploits images of rape to instil hatred for the enemy (*Dobrenko 2016*). Indeed, rape has long been considered a mere by-product of armed conflict, like pillaging, and was rarely documented in official records (*Flaschka 2020; Mühlhäuser 2016*). In the Hague (1907) and Geneva (1949) conventions, rape was considered as an injury to a woman’s honour, as distinct from crimes against the body and dignity of the victim. It was not until the 1990s when the international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda declared sex crimes as serious international crimes, and an element of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity (*Moodrick-Even Khen and Hagay-Frey 2013*).²

In recent decades, attention to the gender dimension of genocide and the prevalence of sexual violence during armed conflict has grown considerably. Major instances like the mass rape of German women at the end of the Second World War have been studied extensively by historians (*Gebhart 2016*) and represented in documentaries like *BeFreier und BeFreite* (*Sander 1992*) and feature films like *A Woman in Berlin* (*Färberböck 2008*). However, as argued by Andrea *Pető (2017)*, the ‘unsilencing’ of sexual violence is often subject to a politics of memory intended to highlight a community’s status as a victim and obscure its acts as a perpetrator.

In Lithuania today, the name of Estera Kverelytė is known to very few, just as very few are likely to know much about the prevalence of sexual violence committed by locals against their Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust. On the other hand, many more will have heard of Elena Spirgevičiūtė, an ethnic Lithuanian murdered by a pro-Soviet partisan after an attempted rape in 1944. Her case was silenced during the Soviet period, but her diary was preserved and published secretly by dissidents. Commemorations of her fate became public as Lithuania approached independence, and a process to canonize her as a saint was initiated in 1999 (*Blum and Regamey 2015*). Portraying her as a “martyr of faith and chastity,” insofar as she died while resisting an attempted rape, the hagiographical literature on Spirgevičiūtė reinforces post-Soviet martyrological views of a nation founded on victimhood under Soviet occupation.³

More recently, Lithuanian collaboration with German forces and the implication of locals in genocide have become the subject of intense study and debate focused on the concept of “communal” violence (*Bartov 2013a*) and the “implicated subject” (*Rothberg 2019*). As distinct from the process of genocide in central, western, and south-eastern Europe, where the Jewish population was deported to the sites of industrial killing, the killing of Jews in Lithuania took place “on the spot”—on the streets, in town squares, and in nearby forests (*Hilberg 2003*). Communal violence is thus defined as violence “rooted at the local level against targeted groups within the community (*Beorn 2020*).” It is sometimes called “intimate” due to the close social ties between the victims and perpetrators (*Kopstein*

and Wittenberg 2018), a fact that implicates members of the community at the time when the violence occurs, as well as in retrospect, as an “implicated subject” or community of memory (Rothberg 2019).⁴

Yet, although the violence occurred in plain sight, the testimony of local eyewitnesses was long treated with scepticism by historians writing from far-off capitals. As a result, the inner workings of communal violence remained opaque to outsiders (Bartov 2013b). In fact, as discussed below, accounts of rape feature prominently in memoirs written by Jewish survivors and even some Lithuanians, and in numerous eyewitness testimonies transcribed immediately after the war. They can also be found in the records of trials held by the Soviet authorities against war criminals, now freely available in the national archives, and in hundreds of audio-visual testimonies collected by grass-roots activists, as well as major memorial foundations and libraries since the 1990s, many of which have more recently become available for viewing online. However, this direct, first-hand knowledge of communal violence, including instances of sexual violence committed by locals against their Jewish neighbours, has not been disseminated. Instead, public memory of the Second World War is strongly influenced by politicized narratives that portray the nation as a monumental, collective subject of injustice (Davoliūtė 2021; Budrytė 2021). To address this problem, this paper adopts the strategy of unsilencing advocated by Andrea Pető of “showcasing” instances when contemporary eyewitnesses have spoken up as witnesses, victims, and perpetrators’ (Pető 2017, p. 137).

Numerous and detailed accounts of sexual violence are contained in the audio-visual recordings collected by the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation and available online at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. As distinct from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History Archive and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which consist mostly of testimonies by Jewish survivors, this unique collection includes thousands of interviews with individuals described by the Foundation as “perpetrators, collaborators and non-Jewish witnesses across 21 European countries”. Supplemented with interviews from other sources, they constitute the main oral history holdings of the United States Holocaust Museum (2014).

Approximately 300 interviews with non-Jewish witnesses from Lithuania can be identified in the databases of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Of these, 255 interviews are specifically identified as belonging to the Lithuania Documentation Project, launched on 14 April 1998, with Nathan Beyrak as the project director (USHMM n.d.). This paper is based on the examination of 150 interviews from this collection, selected based on their availability online and topographical coverage of events in provincial towns and villages, as distinct from the larger cities of Kaunas or Vilnius. The testimonies were collected from 1998 to 2008 from different regions of Lithuania, mostly in the areas around small towns or *shtetls* where the Jewish population was destroyed.

Based on contextualized showcasing of several of these testimonies, this paper demonstrates that local knowledge of sexual violence committed against Jewish women and girls under the German occupation of Lithuania has persisted for decades among the non-Jewish population, though it has been overshadowed by politicized narratives such as the Soviet documentary, or post-Soviet national martyrologies. Studying the perspective of non-Jewish eyewitnesses provides a distinct supplement to the memoirs and testimonies of Jewish survivors. In addition to confirming the prevalence of sexual violence as an aspect of the genocide, it provides insight into the social embeddedness of memory, the diversity of perspectives and tensions among the implicated subjects, and the challenge of working through an inherited history of perpetration in a post-conflict society.

2. Sexual Violence and Histories of the Holocaust

Sexual violation, as distinct from artillery fire, is rarely documented, and this absence is reflected in historiographical traditions where the document is taken as a fact and the testimony of witnesses is treated as suspect. Since official records and statistics reflect the concerns and priorities of the occupying forces, they provide little evidence of rape or

other forms of sexual violence. On the other hand, the prevalence of rape as something that everybody knew about but did not discuss (Sinnreich 2008) is amply demonstrated in personal testimonies of war and conflict, be this in written accounts such as diaries and memoirs, witness statements in a judicial process, interviews that are transcribed, or more recently, audio-visual recordings.

Regina Mühlhäuser highlights one of the rare situations when the ubiquity of sexual violence committed by German soldiers was “overheard” by the state in the form of secret recordings of prison cell conversations. From 1939 to 1945, the Allies held more than 13,000 German prisoners in wiretapped cells. Because the purpose of the wiretapping was to gather information of political and military significance, conversations relating to sexuality, lasting for over an hour, were summarized by a single word: ‘women.’

Yet one conversation between two German soldiers about rape was transcribed. A 21-year-old sailor reminisced of his sexual relations with the ‘pretty Jewess’ who cleaned the barracks where he was stationed in Lithuania. In addition to cleaning, she ‘let herself get banged,’ he explained. ‘That’s not new, of course, they got laid, the Jewish broads, in a way that it was not nice anymore.’ One day she did not show up for work, as she had been revealed as a Jew and executed. ‘Yeah, they didn’t realize she was a Jewess, she was quite decent and so on. Tough luck she had to bite the dust! 75,000 Jews were shot there’ (Mühlhäuser 2016).

As this transcript shows, sexual violence occurs during war not only as a systematic means of attack but also because the conflict places women and children in physically vulnerable positions, with limited or non-existent means of redress. In a book whose title, *Holocaust by Bullets*, reinforced the distinct nature of the German genocide of the Jews in Eastern Europe, Father Francis Desbois underscores the “invisibility” of sexual violence to archive-based historiography: “The Jewish women selected by the Germans as sex-slaves and assassinated at the end of the war are not mentioned in any of the archives. Yet witnesses often mentioned them. They knew them before the occupation and were often present at their assassination” (Desbois and Shapiro 2010).

Thus, although the organised rape of Jewish women was not an explicit German policy, the process of genocide created conditions that exposed individuals to various abuses and put them at risk of being raped by a wide range of actors, including perpetrators, bystanders, and even fellow victims. Sexual violence was an ubiquitous feature of the overall pattern of violence behind the Eastern Front (Mühlhäuser 2009; Röger 2014, 2020; Röger and Debruyne 2016). In his survey of sexual violence against Jewish women in occupied Ukraine, Anatoly Podolsky notes that many Jewish women who were not immediately executed were exploited by the Nazi authorities and Ukrainian police to perform household service that included sexual slavery in the months before their final execution (Podolsky 2010). As emphasized by Father Desbois, the “Holocaust of Jewish women in Eastern Europe constitutes a chapter of history that has barely been opened” (Desbois and Shapiro 2010).

Among academics, Joan Ringelheim (1985) was among the first to draw attention to gender-specific experiences of the Holocaust, including the vulnerability of women and girls to rape and sexual torture. However, these early efforts encountered resistance among historians and survivors who felt it necessary to defend a monolithic narrative in which the gender of the victim was subsidiary to their identity as Jews. Laurence Langer worried that attention to gender would bring the suffering of different categories of people into a ‘cruel competition’. He described the universe of the Holocaust as a ‘violated world beyond gender’ (Langer 1998). In a letter to Ringelheim, Cynthia Ozick went so far as to describe it as ‘morally wrong’ to focus on the distinct experience of women during the Holocaust because it leads ‘further down the road of eradicating Jews from history ... The Holocaust happened to victims who were not seen as men, women or children, but as Jews’, she emphasized (cited in Waxmann 2017, pp. 1–2).

Over time, however, scholarship gradually came to accept the value of exploring the various ‘subject positions’ among the victims of Nazism, Jewish and non-Jewish (Waxmann

2017). Beyond the pioneering efforts of feminist scholars, attention to the question of gender, sex, and sexuality also emerged from the emphasis placed by a group of West German historians on the experience of everyday life, the *Alltagsgeschichte* of Nazi rule in Germany. The valorisation of private experience led to a re-evaluation of the personal testimony of eyewitnesses and survivors as a source of knowledge about the past. The focus on testimony was part of a shift in historical research from the public sphere to the private sphere, to the study of the experience of everyday life under the Nazi regime within Germany itself and throughout Europe under German occupation (Baumel 2000).

3. Sexual Violence in the First and Second Waves of Holocaust Testimony

The audio-visual interviews conducted by the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation contribute to what could be considered as the third wave of Holocaust eyewitness testimony, coinciding with the end of the Cold War.⁵ The first wave emerged in the immediate aftermath of WWII, as Jewish survivors organized a massive effort to collect grassroots testimony to what they called the “catastrophe” or *khurbn* in the Yiddish term commonly used at the time (Jockusch 2013). The second wave began in the 1960s and is often associated with the impact of the spectacular trial of top Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, who was kidnapped from Argentina by Israeli special forces and brought to trial in Jerusalem in 1961 (Felman 2001).

Regarding the first wave, Laura Jockusch has documented how Jews in fourteen countries established historical commissions, documentation centres, and projects to “document, witness and testify” to the recent annihilation of European Jews (Jockusch 2013). The “Black Book of the Soviet Jewry” compiled by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman is a well-known example of such efforts from the USSR. It includes contributions from Jewish and gentile witnesses, including Elena Kutorgienė, a Lithuanian doctor involved in the rescue of the Jews. However, this initiative was suppressed under Stalin. The Vilnius Jewish Museum, which held the collection of original documents, was disbanded in 1948 along with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The “Black Book” was published in Jerusalem in 1980 and in Kyiv only in 1991 (Studies n.d.).

A lesser-known collection of first-wave survivor testimonies focused specifically on the Holocaust in Lithuania was compiled by Leyb Koniuchowsky (Bankier 2011). An engineer from the town of Alytus, he was imprisoned and then escaped from the Kaunas ghetto and survived in hiding until the German retreat. From 1944 to 1946 he travelled across Poland and Germany, gathering testimonies from Jewish survivors, amassing a total of 1682 pages of eyewitness accounts by 150 survivors from 171 provincial towns and villages of Lithuania. He completed the work in 1949 and deposited copies with YIVO in New York and at Yad Vashem (Valone 2014).

The first-generation testimonies collected by Koniuchowsky provide clear indications of the prevalence of sexual violence committed by local collaborators with the Nazis (identified interchangeably in the account below as ‘partisans’ and ‘bandits’) against Jewish women and girls. The following testimony was recorded from a witness from the town of Anykščiai:

The girls sat next to Motl and told him that while the men were being removed from the synagogue and murdered, a second group of partisans was removing a number of pretty young girls from their homes and raping them in the streets and yards. Women who were found hiding were taken to the prison and from there the Lithuanians brought them to the ‘shoemakers’ synagogue. Around midnight a bunch of half-drunken partisans broke into the synagogue, their hand-held lamps lighting up every corner of the place. Motl was hiding his sister. His cousin and his sister’s friend also managed to hide nearby . . . Together with the women who were brought from the prison, there was a woman from Kaunas who was lying beside her husband. The Lithuanian bandits noticed her and commanded the woman to come with them. With tear-filled eyes her husband pleaded, “Don’t take my wife.” At this the partisans stepped on his throat and

choked him; the next morning he was found dead. His wife had been removed from the synagogue. From the courtyard, choking cries from the women were heard. One young girl, Dobke Dubinovskiy, was brought unconscious into the synagogue after being raped. When she came to, she reported the horror that she had endured. The Lithuanians had held the victim by her hands and feet while the rest of them raped her. Thus, it was with all the women [. . .] After the rape they would shoot the women (Bankier 2011, p. 125).

According to Fielder Valone, the accounts of sexual violence in the Koniuchovsky collection attest to the ritualized nature of the violence committed by local gentiles against their Jewish neighbours. “Sexual violence and the rape of Jewish women imparted a sense of finality to the rapid escalation of anti-Jewish policies. In addition to humiliating the victim herself, such acts also tormented members of the broader Jewish community” (Valone 2019).

However, while these accounts clearly presented rape as an integral element of the communal violence, they had little impact on the early historiography of WWII. According to Jockusch, “historians cultivated a suspicion of memory and the accounts of contemporaries and studied the Holocaust almost entirely without the voices of its victims” (Jockusch 2013). Attitudes towards testimony would change in the 1960s, driven by innovations in the judicial process such as the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, which heralded a “revolution of the victim”, and the “era of the witness” (Felman 2001).

The second wave of Holocaust testimony, represented in the Cold War West by authors like Elie Wiesel, Jean Amery, and Simon Wiesenthal (Klein 2018), was mirrored in the USSR by several works of literature and testimony, such as the 1961 poem “Baby Yar” by Evgenii Evtushenko, seen as having broken the silence on the Holocaust as a key moment of the cultural Thaw (Eistrakh 2020). This trend was initiated by Jewish Lithuanian authors such as Ichocas Meras (1960), who published a set of autobiographical short stories entitled *Yellow Patch* (*Geltonas lopas*), arguably the first representation of communal violence against Jews in the provinces of Lithuania, including cautious reference to the sexual exploitation of Jewish women. The memoirs and novels of Masha Rol’nikaitė, another Jewish Lithuanian survivor of the Holocaust, also depict the role of locals in the Holocaust, including the use by Lithuanian collaborators of a brothel set up by the Germans and the rape and murder of Jewish woman—narratives in strong tension with the Soviet trope of national unity in the face of German aggression (Walke 2020).

Additional second-wave testimony of rape from the 1960s are to be found in depositions gathered in the context of Soviet trials of war criminals. For example, returning to the case of Darbėnai, testimony to the rape committed by some local collaborators is given in the transcribed confession of Juozas Girtas, who participated in the execution of the remaining Jewish women and children of Darbėnai (LYA 2021). However, none of these testimonies, neither the first nor the second wave, have exercised much influence on the public memory of WWII, or drawn attention to the role of sexual violence.

4. Testimonies of the Lithuania Documentation Project

The majority of the 150 interviews examined for this article were conducted by Saulius Beržinis (from 1998 to 2004) or Alicija Žukauskaitė (from 2005–2008), both professional filmmakers and remarkably talented interlocutors, accompanied by the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation project director Natan Beyrak, his interpreter, and a cameraman. Their approach was to find and interview only those individuals who could provide direct, eyewitness accounts of what they saw happening to their Jewish neighbours, or those who were involved in perpetration. According to Žukauskaitė, the interviewers were instructed not to digress from what their interlocutors had personally seen and heard. Aside from a few introductory questions about the subject’s identity, there was no effort to solicit personal views or interpretations. Notably, as distinct from the more structured approach used by the Shoah Foundation, for example, there was no explicit policy or attempt made to solicit responses about sexual violence (Beržinis 2021; Žukauskaitė 2021).

In spite of this less structured approach to interviews, the Lithuanian documentation Project succeeded in eliciting highly informative and personal responses. Although they did not follow a script, the pattern of questions was quite uniform. The witnesses were asked to provide their name, place of birth, and personal background. The simple set of questions that followed appears designed to prompt recollection about the events at the beginning of the war without leading the interviewee, other than to verify details concerning the course events, the identity of actors, and the accuracy of recollection. Most of the interviews were held in the home of the interlocutor, and in some cases (mostly those conducted by Beržinis) they also went outside to see the site of the events related. Most importantly, the interviews were conducted in Lithuanian, the native tongue of the eyewitnesses and the interviewers. Beržinis and Žukauskaitė made extensive preparations for each interview, including research into the files gathered on some of the interviewed individuals by the Soviet authorities. Their meticulous efforts are evident in the quality and flow of the conversations. Moreover, the visit of the film crew was always preceded by preliminary visits by Beržinis or Žukauskaitė to establish a personal bond with the witnesses, to discuss all questions and to prepare for the recording process. Attention to detail and the development of strong interpersonal rapport with the respondents contributed to the high degree of candour in the recorded testimonies (Beržinis 2021; Žukauskaitė 2021).

If historical studies of atrocities often focus on the motivation of the perpetrator and the role of ideology, this set of testimonies reveals how the phenomenon of sexual violence is deeply embedded in social and familial contexts. Referring to the Holocaust in Europe in general, Doris Bergen argues persuasively that “family and intimate relationships facilitated the murders’ actions by providing emotional and material support and easing troubled consciences after the fact. To borrow a cliché, it takes a village to commit genocide” (Bergen 2013). Moreover, as argued by Tomasz Frydel in his analysis of rural Polish society under German occupation, the conditions of extreme violence triggered a rearrangement of social relations along an “axis of kinship networks” (Frydel 2018). Not surprisingly, oral testimony from several Lithuanian provinces confirms that the memory of sexual violence has been preserved and transmitted through the prism of family relations, illustrating how different implicated subjects negotiate their respective positions vis-à-vis a constantly shifting backdrop of extreme violence.

The tortured reception of extreme violence in the close-knit family context is represented in the testimony of Anelė Baublytė—Mičiulienė (b. 1911), herself a young woman at the time. In 1941, when the killing of the Jewish residents of Anykščiai and nearby towns started, Mičiulienė had just married and moved to the town with her groom: “I heard everything at night. Could not sleep. My husband slept but I did not . . . He did not hear but I always heard the screams . . . As soon as I lay down at night, I heard everything. Everything was so close . . . I was young, I had not yet experienced such horrors” (Mičiulienė 2009). The scene of testimony shifts from her matrimonial bed to the house of her sister, married to a man involved in the shooting. Here, Mičiulienė summarizes what her sister heard from her husband.

He would come home and would tell her everything he saw: “Good gracious, beautiful girls, sixteen or seventeen, wearing several dresses one on the top of another. They still hoped to live . . . And the partisans came, those whom we knew very well, our neighbour Gražys, and then Kalendra, they took them to the forest, raped them and then pushed them into the pit. And these girls still try to somehow dig themselves from under the dirt . . . [gesture of an attempt to the face of dirt].”

This horrifying image of rape and murder blends with talk about the impact of the violence on the sister’s family life: “This brother-in-law of ours was not a good man but when he would return home, he would hide his head under the pillow. My sister would ask: “Why aren’t you talking to me? Say something . . . ” And he would answer: “Shut up, my ears are going deaf from the horror . . . Young girls . . . They grab these children by their legs and toss them down.” When asked by Žukauskaitė how she could know that such

actions were really occurring, Mičiulienė exclaims: “My God, how not to know? They were neighbours, we lived nearby! Gražys lived right next door, he walked around with a gun!” (Mičiulienė 2009).

A similar indirect account of the torture of Jewish women, deeply embedded in local social networks, is evident the testimony of Jonas Baura’s (b. 1929), who was a 12-year-old child in summer 1941. He starts his account by describing his personal encounter with the Jewish victims. Sent to the nearest town to make purchases by his single mother, Baura was walking home and accidentally stepped into a group of arrested Jewish residents of the town, not fully grasping the circumstances. After walking to the end of the town, Baura tried to step away from the group, but the German guard would not allow it. “We reached the intersection and I wanted to turn towards my home. The German shouted “halt!” and would not let me leave the group. I started crying . . . But he did not care, he pushed me in and forced to walk with the group. I started crying even more but so what? Everyone there was crying. You know, there were women, children, grandparents . . . ” (Baura 1998).

Baura was accidentally noticed by a Lithuanian “white band” called Vilius Beinoravičius, for whose family Baura sometimes worked as a farmhand. “Wait here”, Beinoravičius said. “I will be back”. Again, the formatting of quote marks, double or single, before or after the period, needs to be consistent. This is best done with find and replace. I waited for some time. I do not remember many details. I could hear people crying and moaning around me. And after some five minutes Beinoravičius came back with a big officer, a German, with stars here, on his forehead, with a skull attached to his hat, they were saying something in German . . . In the end he (Beinoravičius) told me: “Kid, run home and do not turn back.” You know, I ran and ran for two kilometres . . . I will not forget this . . . Never, for my entire life.”

After this recounting of the chance escape from a group of doomed victims, the scene of the testimony shifts to the private house of Baura’s rescuer Beinoravičius, who was socializing with his companions. Without any prompting from the interviewers, Baura turns to a description of rape:

They drank, their tongues loosened, and they started to brag: “I shot this many, I shot that many.” During these parties there was a guy called Jurevičius, he was shooting Jews in Rokiškis. Jurevičius said: “They were burying [corpses] and I forced aside two Jewesses, beautiful ones, raped them and forced them to dig their own pit. They dug that pit and started screaming. So, then I [gesture] with the machine gun. And before this they told me, ‘Child, the same will fall on your head.’ Ha ha ha!” [Baura imitates the perpetrator laughing]. He roared with laughter. How can anybody live with such a conscience? I do not know . . .

This gruesome account is spontaneously woven into Baura’s story of his rescue, also demonstrating that he feels no loyalty for the man who rescued him from the chance annihilation (Baura 1998).

The two testimonies cited above relate incidents of sexual violence as overheard by the witness in contexts where intimate, “insider” information was exchanged. Similar exchanges are to be found in the accounts of Janina Damaševičienė (b. 1922 in Trakiškis, near Panevėžys), Bronius Grižas (b. 1918 in Svėdasai), and others (Damaševičienė 2007; Grižas 2007). However, in the testimony of Janina Valeckaitė-Kaupienė (b. 1922), she makes the rape and murder of her best friend Berta Maušaitė into the central narrative of the destruction of the local Jewish community. Notably, this testimony brings the fact of sexual violence out into the open, public space of the locale:

We were harvesting cereals, making sheaves. And then we saw her running towards us. “Help me, people!” We took her in and covered her with sheaves, like this . . . along the wall. And then, behind her came Kybartas and Stuokis, on horseback. Where did you hide the Jews? they shouted. “We haven’t seen anything”, we answered. And they cursed at me in such an ugly manner, grabbed my spade and started stabbing (into the sheaves). They stabbed her into the shoulder, and she screamed. Then they pulled her out by the hair and forced her

behind the barn. First, he raped her, and then he shot her once to the gut, and the second shot to the head. The pits were already dug, so they grabbed the cart used for carrying cereals, threw her into the cart, took her to the pit and threw her in (Kaupienė 1998).

The interviewer then asks: “So which one of them did it? Stuokis? Kybartas? Which one was stabbing those sheaves?”

Kybartas, mostly Kybartas. Stuokis joined in as well . . . And I could not . . . I could not watch to the end. I only saw the beginning when they hit her with the barrel of the rifle into this part . . . I saw how she dropped to the ground. I lost consciousness so some others came to help me recover. I felt sick and weak and only afterwards people told me: “That’s it, they shot her and took her away.” There was also a guy called Kacevyčia (Kacevyčius) there, he worked with us. A big guy. He fainted as well, could not look at it.”

Even ‘today’, at the moment of enunciation in 1998, the giving of such testimony by Valeckaitė-Kaupienė was seen as a fateful act for the speaker and her community. By revealing this spectacular instance of sexual violence, Valeckaitė-Kaupienė makes it clear that “everybody knew” what was happening, that little, if any, effort was made to conceal the crime from the scrutiny of onlookers, and that this event took place in the plain sight: “He took her behind the barn. Those who had the nerve to look, looked. Those who could not, did not. There were those who looked and saw. Many people were working over there. Some fifteen people, I think. They saw.” The fear of breaking the taboo of silence about what was essentially public knowledge continues to be felt by the witness in the present. “So there. I have told everything. Now I will wait for the murderers who will come after me” (Kaupienė 1998).

Whether this last statement was meant to be understood directly or at some degree of displacement, it vividly expresses the fear of retribution, the sense of mutual surveillance, intimidation, and coercion that was generated by the environment of extreme violence in these enclosed locales at the time. It encapsulates the burden of the implicated subject, the tortured memory of crimes committed by one’s own community.

5. Conclusions: National Narratives and Local Knowledge

Based on a survey of testimonies collected by the Lithuanian Documentation Project of the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation, this paper showcases several accounts of sexual violence against Jewish women and girls. The focus on testimonies by non-Jewish eyewitnesses is motivated by the assumption, sometimes encountered in the literature noted above, that the testimony of Jewish survivors are the sole remaining accounts of such events, and that the local, non-Jewish population in Eastern Europe remembers the events of WWII differently than Jews (Valone 2014, 2019).

There is little question that the dominant post-Soviet Lithuanian narratives and commemorative practices have been focused on the suffering of ethnic Lithuanians at the hands of the Soviets, building moreover on the Soviet tradition of national martyrology, glossing over Jewish suffering at the hands of Lithuanians. However, the fact that the testimony of non-Jewish Lithuanians to sexual violence committed by Lithuanians against Jews during the Holocaust has not been heard and integrated into public memory, does not mean that it does not exist.

Although few have ever looked for it, the memory of these events persisted for decades in the very locales where the events took place. The issue, as Antony Sulek puts it with reference to the similar situation in neighbouring Poland, is that this local memory has rarely been communicated, it has not become part of public memory (Sulek 2019). Moreover, as demonstrated in the Soviet film featuring Estera, the narratives of the times that were produced have tended to silence the intimate memory of locals. The challenge of gaining access to this memory is formidable and requires exhaustive fieldwork, but it is necessary to disseminate and integrate this knowledge to broader narratives of the period.

The material in the Jeff and Toby Foundation archive is vast, and this paper has aimed only to provide a qualitative sampling of how non-Jewish witnesses, primarily those who did not take an active part in the violence, perceived and recalled incidents of sexual violence during the Holocaust in Lithuania. In view of the reluctance of witnesses in general to share memories of sexual violence, it is remarkable that the interviewers were able to elicit such candid accounts from these subjects, who were at least indirectly implicated, in a social sense, in the atrocities they described.

There was nothing in the mandate or script to ask about rape, for example, but the direct approach taken by Saulius Beržinis and Alicija Žukauskaitė to asking questions about the specifics of events and the identity of actors helped to shape unusually frank and forthcoming testimonies. The intimacy of the dialogue, which the project director Nathan Beyrak has highlighted as the essence of oral testimony (Beyrak 1995), was enabled by the close rapport, detailed preparation, and social closeness of the Lithuanian interviewers and interviewees.

These interviews convincingly demonstrate that the memory of communal violence of gentiles against Jew, including instances of sexual violence, was very much present among Lithuanian eyewitnesses, even several decades after the events. The often-asserted assumption, that Lithuanians “remember” the events of WWII differently than Jews, needs to be understood in terms of how certain narratives of WWII have been constructed by the state and national actors, as distinct from how local witnesses recall and retell what they have seen and heard, or indeed how local communities may have constructed the events. Notably, while the story of Estera Kverelytė remains unfamiliar to most Lithuanians today, a steppingstone dedicated to her memory was recently installed in her hometown of Darbėnai, the outcome of persistent efforts of several local history enthusiasts, and a sign of how patterns of public memory evolve over time (Goldstein and Kanarskis 2020).

By collecting the eyewitness testimonies of non-Jewish eyewitnesses to the Holocaust in Lithuania during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Jeff and Toby Foundation contributed to more than simply preserving the memory of the events of the Holocaust. The events themselves have, by and large, already been recorded in the memoirs of Jewish survivors, but by preserving testimonies to the local, insider accounts of communal violence committed by gentiles against Jews, as recalled by Lithuanians themselves, these audio-visual records of the “third wave” of Holocaust testimony keep the door open for future generations of Lithuanians to come to terms with the difficult heritage of perpetration.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Of the 200,000 Jews that lived in Lithuania on the eve of the German invasion of the USSR, only some 8000 survived. On the Holocaust in Lithuania, see (Dieckmann 2011; Bubnys 2005). On the first weeks of the German invasion and the Holocaust in the town Darbėnai and the border regions of Lithuania, see, (Rukšėnas 2013, 2015; Kwiet 1998).
- ² This paper adopts the definition of sexual violence established by the UN Commissioner for Human Rights: “Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence and encompasses any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. Sexual violence takes multiple forms and includes rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration and forced nudity” (United Nations 2014).
- ³ As reported on an active Facebook page dedicated to the canonization of Elena Spirgevičiūtė (1924–1944), her diary was republished in 2021 and her remains reburied at the St. Anthony of Padova (Šv. Antanas Paduvietis) church in Kaunas (facebook.com/spirgeviute) accessed on 12 December 2021.
- ⁴ Some scholars employ the term “communal genocide” to characterize this process, but not without controversy, insofar as the definition of genocide includes criminal intent, and so communal genocide would seem to ascribe collective responsibility to local communities for the genocidal policy that was devised and implemented by external German forces with local collaborators (Beorn 2020).

- ⁵ It is important to distinguish the notion of three ‘waves’ of eyewitness testimony from the notion of second and third ‘generation’ of Holocaust testimony, which refers to post-memory accounts of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, perpetrators and implicated subjects (Hirsch 2012). Thus, the ‘third wave’ of testimony examined here is ‘first generation’ testimony that was recorded ‘belatedly’ after the collapse of the USSR.

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