

Jewish Chronicle

The Holocaust survivors facing war-crimes trials

06/06/2008

By Dana Gloger

Elderly Jews say they are outraged that Lithuania is pursuing them over their wartime role as anti-Nazi partisans

Fania Branstovsky was just 20 when she joined the Jewish partisan movement fighting the Nazis in her home country of Lithuania. In the Vilnius ghetto, she and her fellow partisans carried out attacks against the occupying German forces. By the end of the war, almost her entire family — more than 50 people — had perished at the hands of the Nazis. Yet now, over 60 years later, she is the one being branded unpatriotic, and is reportedly under investigation by Lithuanian authorities for alleged war crimes.

National and local newspapers and television stations are referring to the 86-year-old Holocaust survivor, who now works as a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, as a murderer and a terrorist. Earlier this year, the Vilnius-based newspaper *Lietuvos Aidas* called for her to be put on trial. The allegation levelled against her is that during her time as a partisan, she committed crimes against Lithuanians. But she strongly denies that she and her partisan colleagues ever targeted groups of local people.

“It’s very upsetting and shocking,” says Branstovsky, a mother of two, with six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. “We fought against the powers of the Nazis. Not against the locals. The Nazis wanted to annihilate all Jews and all people who loved freedom, and I joined the underground partisan organisation in September 1943 to defend myself and my people. It was a matter of honour.”

Even with a possible war-crimes prosecution hanging over her, she has no regrets. “I didn’t want all Jewish people to die with no resistance. I feel very proud and I’m very glad that I had the opportunity to do something for honour and humanity.”

She vows that the prospect of being put on trial for war crimes will not drive her out of her country. “I’m very patriotic. I was born here and have always lived here. Of course I am worried, but I am not planning to leave because of this. By doing this they want to rewrite history.”

Branstovsky is not the only Holocaust survivor being pursued by the Lithuanian authorities. Yitzhak Arad, a historian and former chairman of Israel’s Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, is also being investigated over similar alleged crimes.

Arad joined the partisan movement in the Vilnius ghetto during the war. His parents had already been taken by the Nazis two years earlier, eventually dying in Warsaw. So the teenage Arad decided to try to make it alone. “The night before we had to go to the ghetto, I escaped to Belorussia [then part of the Soviet Union, now Belarus],” he recalls. “In doing that, I escaped the killings. Forty members of my family were killed as well as many people from my village.”

He returned to Vilnius as a member of the pro-Soviet partisan movement, whose main activity

was sabotaging German trains. Having fought so hard to survive the Nazi killings, Arad, who settled in Israel after the war, says he is “upset and disappointed” at being branded a war criminal.

“In doing this they are trying to rewrite history and to turn the murderers of thousands of Jews into heroes and the few survivors into criminals,” he says.

Although he has had no formal confirmation from the authorities that they are looking into his partisan activities, or that a prosecution is planned, he says he has heard through other channels that a group of anti-Soviets in the country filed a complaint against him to Lithuanian prosecutors. This led to an investigation being launched. The local media have also reported that an investigation is under way, accusing both Arad and Branstovsky of massacring civilians in the village of Kaniukai.

The prospect of standing trial has, naturally enough, left Arad reluctant to return to his home town. “I have not been back for two years, and I’m not planning on going back now,” he says.

If trials do go ahead, it seems that a third Jewish partisan could be the primary witness for the prosecution. Rachel Margolis, founder of Vilnius’s Jewish museum, has written a memoir recounting her escape from the ghetto and her time as a partisan. Extracts from her book, she fears, could be used as evidence by prosecutors.

Margolis, who lost her family in the Holocaust and now lives in Israel, was unavailable to talk to the JC. But according to Efraim Zuroff, director of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, an investigator was sent to the address which she uses in Lithuania. He says the investigator interviewed Rachel Konstanian, the director of the Vilnius Jewish Museum, and told her that he was looking for Margolis in order to question her regarding an investigation into Fania Branstovsky.

Margolis’s cousin, Budd Margolis, who lives in London, fears that the stress of going through a trial could prove life-threatening to Holocaust survivors now in their eighties. “This is very shocking and upsetting,” he says. “My cousin, as well as the other two people involved, are all quite elderly now, and it’s very unfortunate that they have to deal with this at this stage of their lives. It’s terribly unjust.”

He adds that his cousin is now too scared to return to Lithuania. “She is worried she may get arrested.”

Rachel Margolis’s memoir, which has been published in Lithuania, contains a description of how a group of partisans, including Fania Branstovsky, attacked a Nazi garrison in the village of “Kanyuki”. She writes: “The partisans had surrounded the garrison, but the Nazis were exceptionally well armed and beat off all attacks. They broke the flanks of the Jewish detachments, and the partisans withdrew precipitously. Then Magid jumped up on a rock and yelled: ‘We are Jews. We will show them what we are capable of. Forward, comrades!’ This sobered the men up; they ran back and won.”

A willingness to prosecute alleged war criminals is something not often displayed by the Lithuanian authorities. Even though around 212,000 of its Jews were killed, the Baltic country has only ever brought three of its citizens to trial over war crimes, two of whom — Kazys Gimzauskas and Algimantas Dailide — were convicted, but were excused imprisonment, in Gimzauskas’s case because of illness, in Dailide’s because of advanced age. Dailide was 85, a

year younger than Fania Branstovsky is now.

According to the Lithuania embassy in London, there are currently no plans to prosecute Branstovsky. In an emailed statement, Minister Counsellor, Deputy Head of Mission Jonas Grinevicius said: “There is no lawsuit against Mrs Branstovsky and there are no charges by the Prosecution General against Mrs Branstovsky, nor there is any other legal action against Mrs Branstovsky initiated. Mrs Branstovsky is only asked to appear in the court hearings as a witness in the case of the massacre by Soviet partisans of peaceful inhabitants of Kaniukai village in Salcininkai district. The killing of 38 Kaniukai inhabitants occurred in January 1944, it was committed by 120-150 Soviet partisans.”

Lithuanian denials do not impress Efraim Zuroff. He has written a strongly worded letter to Asta Skaisgirytė–Liauskienė, the Lithuanian ambassador in Israel. In it he accuses the Lithuanian authorities of “launching a campaign to discredit Jewish resistance fighters by falsely accusing them of war crimes in order to deflect attention from widespread Lithuanian participation in the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust”.

He tells the JC that this is a “malicious campaign against the innocent heroes of the anti-Nazi resistance. We are hoping the investigations will be dropped,” he says.

And so are Fania Branstovsky, Yitzhak Arad and Rachel Margolis.