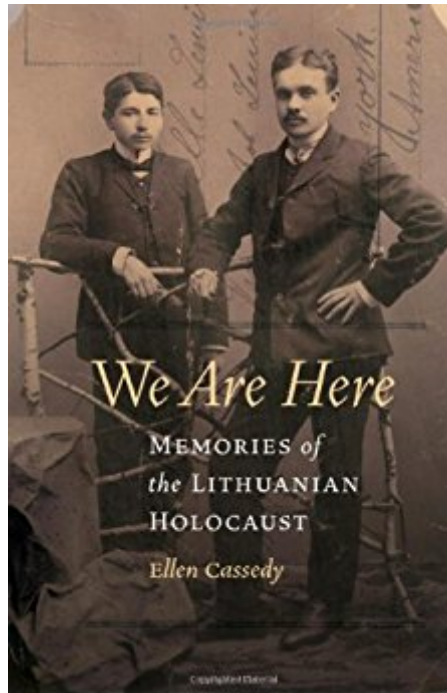




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We Are Here: Memories Of The Lithuanian Holocaust



Synopsis

Winner of the 2013 National Book Prize from Grub Street, the 2013 Towson Prize for Literature, the Silver Medal for History from the 2012 ForeWord Book of the Year Awards, the 2013 Prakhin International Literary Foundation Award, and the 2013-14 Best Book Award from the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. Shortlisted for the 2014 Saroyan Prize. Ellen Cassedy's longing to recover the Yiddish she'd lost with her mother's death eventually led her to Lithuania, once the "Jerusalem of the North." As she prepared for her journey, her uncle, sixty years after he'd left Lithuania in a boxcar, made a shocking disclosure about his wartime experience, and an elderly man from her ancestral town made an unsettling request. Gradually, what had begun as a personal journey broadened into a larger exploration of how the people of this country, Jews and non-Jews alike, are confronting their past in order to move forward into the future. How does a nation--how do successor generations, moral beings--overcome a bloody past? How do we judge the bystanders, collaborators, perpetrators, rescuers, and ourselves? These are the questions Cassedy confronts in *We Are Here*, one woman's exploration of Lithuania's Jewish history combined with a personal exploration of her own family's place in it. Digging through archives with the help of a local whose motives are puzzling to her; interviewing natives, including an old man who wants to "speak to a Jew" before he dies; discovering the complications encountered by a country that endured both Nazi and Soviet occupation--Cassedy finds that it's not just the facts of history that matter, but what we choose to do with them.

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Customer Reviews

“We Are Here” is a book about a perplexing part of history, WWII, a country, Lithuania, a massacre of almost the entire Jewish population. Ellen Cassedy learns of her family history, their part in this historic time and place and makes it her mission to go to Lithuania, to learn Yiddish, to interview Jews and Lithuanians and come to an understanding of what happened, why it happened, who did what to whom and what is ongoing to find the truth. In her quest she finds no easy answer to any of the questions she has. Her determination to learn Yiddish and to bring some understanding to the horrors of the time takes her on a long, complicated journey. If one is to look at the title and the content of the book, one can go in blaming one side for the atrocities, one can go in and blame the other side. Everything has two sides, but, I think, Ellen Cassedy has shown us that there is a third side in this story. First, there is a lot of blame to go around, a lot of hatred to vent. Rightly so, on both sides and each side has blame for the actions of the side they are on. After reading her interviews, the third side emerges. Yes there is blame, there is a horror story there, but there is a way to remember what happened and look with open eyes and minds and come to an understanding of the time it happened, learn a lesson from what happened, and teach what happened so it will never happen again. Certainly there are those who will not agree with what Ellen wrote, but what she wrote and from the words of the people who are working on understanding, there can be something good to come out of this. The hope is for better understanding, better education and better working together to not let this be forgotten, but to move on to make it never happen again.

Many of us are Litvaks, and not too many of us know our past. This book is an intriguing, balanced introduction to understanding both Jewish history in Lithuania and the Jewish present there today--and comes in a readable, enjoyable exploration of one woman's search for her roots and her path towards tolerance. I recommend this book not only for Jewish readers, but for all those with Lithuanian roots who want to better understand how others have experienced and continue to experience Lithuanian history. In fact, I recommend this book for NON-Litvaks who are simply interested in understanding that there is no benefit to playing the suffering sweepstakes--whose

pain is worse--but rather, we must try to join together in understanding that we must all move towards a world where EVERYONE works against all kinds of hate and resentment. That is the brilliance of this book--we move towards that revelation together under Ellen Cassedy's skillful and compelling guidance.

Ellen Cassedy provides invaluable insight into the complexities of life in the Jewish ghettos of Lithuania during World War Two. From the distance of decades following those events, many of us fall prey to the comforts of moral certainty, judging the behavior of people who lived -- and died -- in those times, without having an appreciation of the circumstances that dictated their actions. Cassedy makes such certainty far less absolute, compelling her reader to re-evaluate long-held beliefs about what Jews did to one another, how some cooperated with the Nazis and how some remained passive.

Ellen Cassedy's immersion in Lithuanian Holocaust history is compelling, and illuminating. Her research is thorough, minutely detailed, and touchingly delivered. Beyond the description of her spiritual and physical journey, however, is a remarkable and courageous quest to answer an unanswerable question: how can one go on living after knowing the truths of the nightmare of Nazi genocide of Jews? She answers this reasonably, poetically, and convincingly. She deserves to be lauded, for addressing the question. This is highly recommended reading for anyone drawn to this topic. My own family came from Lithuania; I could not put this book down, and read it in one sitting.

I enjoyed reading Cassedy's memories even though the topic and era are difficult to read about. The author has done a good job of probing for truth, aware of her own biases, and able to look objectively at what was a horrific time for many people. The personal resolution of conflicting stories and points of view that the author came to was very satisfying to me. I highly recommend this book to those who are ready to probe a subject that has been closed, but is now opening and causing people to become more open about what really happened.

Great

In this beautifully written first person narrative Cassedy refuses simple truisms about what it means to "never forget the Holocaust." As she explores her own family's Jewish past, she struggles to learn Yiddish and get to know the broader cultural landscape that is contemporary Lithuania, the place

where her family came from. None of this is easy or simple. For Cassedy the past and its ongoing relationship to the present are critical. Yiddish becomes a way for her to appreciate these complexities. Here Yiddish literature animates every part of the story she tells. And, in so doing, Cassedy uses this literature to help us consider the grey and cloudy space of the present where different legacies of trauma and loss are intermingled. These legacies are, as she reminds us, lived out every day in this place. Cassedy resist making these different legacies somehow equivalent. Instead she helps readers appreciate the horrors that continue to haunt any attempt to come to terms with the Holocaust in Lithuania in the present. She asks us to appreciate those precious efforts that have been made to do this with some integrity even as she shows us how difficult this can be. As she makes clear in the broader cultural climate in Lithuania the Holocaust is increasingly overshadowed by the legacy of Soviet occupation as if one trauma can take the place of another. She resists this logic. Part of what is inspiring about Cassedy's approach is that she looks to past with humility and great compassion to help us imagine a different future even in this fraught terrain.

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