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# Dealing with the Family Past

## (Grand)children of Nazi Collaborators in Lithuania

### Abstract

This article deals with the question of how the (grand)children of local Nazi collaborators in Lithuania have dealt with their family histories and with their (grand)parents' crimes. On the basis of archival materials and interviews, it illuminates how Holocaust perpetrators were convicted, how families were affected by these convictions, and how their lives evolved afterwards, how families coped with uncertainties or family secrets and developed mechanisms of denial or family mythologies. Furthermore, the article illuminates developments after 1990 – the revision of Soviet sentences, processes of rehabilitation and de-rehabilitation, the opening of archives, and the clash between imagined and documented realities.

While in Western European countries, there is a large body of literature on how the children and grandchildren of Nazis have dealt with their family histories, in the Soviet bloc, due to the totalitarian regime that lasted for fifty years, there were no free discussions on the subject and the topic is just about to be opened up to public debate. The situation in different post-Soviet states might vary considering their cultural and historical diversity, yet the issue remains under-researched in the region. This article focuses exclusively on how the children and grandchildren of Nazi collaborators in Lithuania have dealt with their family past.

In recent years, there were several public confessions like that of American-born Rita Gabis, who addressed her grandfather Pranas Purnas's involvement in the murder of Jews in Lithuania during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Another example is American-born Silvia Foti, who revealed her grandfather Jonas Noreika's involvement in the Holocaust, who had previously been considered a national hero in Lithuania.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is Lina Pivoraitė, who confronted her family past and her paternal relatives being involved in the Holocaust while writing her bachelor's thesis at Vilnius University.<sup>3</sup>

This research explores the histories of people who remained silent about their past. The aim of the article is to illuminate how people have learned about their (grand)parents' crimes, what they know, how they feel about it, and how they have incorporated their (grand)parents' crimes into their family history and personal identity.

The primary source for this research was the book *We Did Not Kill* by Arkadijus Vinokuras, which was useful to establish initial contacts.<sup>4</sup> Further sources included

- 1 Rita Gabis, *A Guest at the Shooters' Banquet. My Grandfather's SS Past, My Jewish Family, A Search for the Truth*, New York 2015.
- 2 Silvia Foti, *My Grandfather Wasn't a Nazi-Fighting War Hero – He Was a Brutal Collaborator*, Salon, <https://www.salon.com/2018/12/30/best-of-2018-my-grandfather-wasnt-a-nazi-fighting-war-hero-he-was-a-brutal-collaborator/> (15 August 2020).
- 3 Pivoraitė Lina. *Kai žydai sugrįžta: Molėtų atvejis [When Jews Return]* BA thesis, Vilnius University 2017.
- 4 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*.

archival materials (court sentences, letters of appeal, and inquiries written by children and grandchildren) and interviews conducted with (grand)children during the period from 2019 to 2020. The methods employed here were content analysis of the sources mentioned above.

This article explores the following research questions:

- a) How was the Holocaust perceived and interpreted from the Soviet ideological standpoint; how were the sentences of local Nazi collaborators framed and how were their crimes articulated?
- b) How were the lives of the children and family members affected by the sentences and what kind of family narratives regarding (grand)parents' crimes have been developed within families?
- c) How have the change of political regime and the declaration of Lithuanian independence altered the legacy of the crimes and of the sentences?
- d) How have families learned about the factual circumstances of their (grand)parents' crimes and how has this factual information been reconciled with family narratives?
- e) What attitudes towards their (grand)parents' crimes have (grand)children developed in their lifetimes?

The article is divided into two major parts, covering the Soviet period and the post-Soviet years.

### The Soviet Years: Censoring and Silencing

The section discusses the major differences between Western European and Soviet states with regard to how they dealt with the Holocaust, specifically with regard to how the interpretation of the Holocaust in the Soviet bloc was subjected to particular ideological interpretations, how the Nazi crimes were framed, and how the sentences were carried out. It will moreover investigate how this affected the families and how they developed and stabilised their own narratives of what happened. Anne Marie Roviello, in her interpretation of Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, argued that totalitarianism rules by reducing functioning reality to meaninglessness and substituting functioning reality with an imaginary realm of the ideological – meaning that reality matters only insofar as it fits ideological requirements and interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

In Soviet historiography, the Holocaust was never denied, but was rather subjected to special ideological interpretations. Orthodox Marxism perceived society first in terms of class conflicts, not in terms of ethnic conflicts. In the official discourse, ethnic conflicts of all kinds were seen as by-products of capitalism. Furthermore, it was believed that the major sources of such conflicts in the Soviet Union had already been eliminated and that Soviet society was characterised by fraternity and solidarity among people.

The Second World War played an enormous role in official Soviet discourse – the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany was used to illuminate the antagonism between the Soviet and non-Soviet ideologies and to solidify the idea of fraternity among Soviet nations. The Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish tragedy would therefore have undermined one of the basic ideological premises of the Soviet Union – the

<sup>5</sup> Anne-Marie Roviello/Catherine Temerson, *The Hidden Violence of Totalitarianism. The Loss of the Groundwork of the World*, in: *Social Research* 74 (2007) 3, 923-930, here 927.

idea of equality among all Soviet nations – as it would have differentiated between Soviet citizens on an ethnic basis, dividing them into those who suffered more and those who suffered less.<sup>6</sup>

The ideological framing of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union is well illustrated by the *Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, a volume about the fate of Soviet Jews during the Second World War compiled by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasilij Grossman in late 1944. While editing the volume, Ehrenburg wrote in his correspondence to Grossman that “it is extremely important to show the solidarity of the Soviet people”.<sup>7</sup> In response, Grossman suggested avoiding the term ‘Jew’ and substituting it with general terms like ‘people’ or ‘civilians’. Ehrenburg in turn proposed omitting the terms ‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Lithuanian’ when speaking about Nazi collaborators and members of the local auxiliary police, and to instead just write “полицай” (transliterated from the German *Polizei*), without specifying the nationality of the person in question.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their attempts to fit the ideological framework, the authors were accused of exaggerating the sufferings of Jews. “In reading the book [...] one gets a false picture of the true nature of fascism [...]. Running through the whole book is the idea that the Germans murdered and plundered the Jews only”, as the head of the Party Secretariat’s Agitprop department Georgij Alexandrov wrote in 1974.<sup>9</sup> Following this statement, the volume was banned and all available copies were destroyed.

The Soviet narrative about the Holocaust was based on the premise that Soviet citizens suffered equally and manifested fraternity. This narrative was formulated during the early postwar years and remained dominant up to the fall of the Soviet bloc.

### **Sentencing Nazi Collaborators in Lithuania: “Traitors of the Soviet Motherland”**

To understand how (grand)children cope with their (grand)parents’ crimes, it is important to know how their crimes were framed and how the sentences for these crimes were formulated.

Typically, the sentences were framed following the general logic of Soviet ideology, i.e. the belief that any form of cooperation with the Nazis was, above all else, an anti-Soviet crime. On this basis, most of the Nazi collaborators were sentenced according to the infamous Article 58 of the Penal Code, which covered such offenses as counterrevolutionary or anti-Soviet activities. The major focus was thus on the ideological aspect of being ‘anti-Soviet’, whereas involvement in the Holocaust was reduced to a secondary issue. Meanwhile, the term ‘Jews’ was substituted with neutral terms like ‘people’ or ‘civilians’ and remained, to a certain extent, invisible.

Here, the case of Mykolas Jankūnas is exemplary:

6 Thomas C. Fox, *The Holocaust under Communism*, in: Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, London 2004, 420-439; Zvi Gitelman, *Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, in: Zvi Gitelman (ed.), *Bitter Legacy. Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, Bloomington 1997, 14-42; Alexander Hill, *The War Behind the Eastern Front. The Soviet Partisan Movement in North-West Russia, 1941–1944*, London 2005; Lukasz Hirsizowicz, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Mirror*, in: Lucjan Dobroszycki/Jeffrey S. Gurock (ed.), *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945*, Armonk 1993; William Korey, *Down History’s Memory Hole. Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust*, in: *Present Tense* 10 (1983), 51.

7 Shimon Redlich (ed.) *War, Holocaust and Stalinism*, New York 1995, 350.

8 *Ibid.*, 353.

9 *Ibid.*, 366.

“The military tribunal has convicted Mykolas Jankūnas for the following crimes: During the bourgeois regime in Lithuania from 1918 to 1940, he was a member of the pro-fascist organisation Riflemen’s Union. Then, during the first days of the Second World War, [...] he committed a betrayal of the [Soviet] motherland – in June 1941, he voluntarily joined the troops of the nationalist uprising [...] and took part in the armed resistance against Soviet rule. As a member of the uprising, until September 1941 he guarded arrested citizens and escorted them to execution sites. From June to September 1941, along with other members of uprising, he transported detained people of Jewish origin and Soviet activists to the execution sites. On 1 September 1941, along with other members of the uprising, he escorted around 7,000 Soviet citizens of Jewish origin to the execution site and guarded the execution site. During the night from 1 September to 2 September 1941, he supervised the removal of the victims’ clothes. After the execution of the Soviet citizens, he was given a house and all the belongings of an executed Soviet citizen.”<sup>10</sup>

Other sentences were framed similarly. For example, Bronius Žvynys was convicted of a “betrayal of the [Soviet] motherland”.<sup>11</sup> Leonas Gairionis was convicted of “arresting Soviet citizens and escorting them to the execution sites in July and August 1941” and of “voluntarily joining the German police in 1943 and taking part in arresting Soviet citizens and Soviet partisans”.<sup>12</sup> Juozas Gruodis was convicted, among other things, of “joining the Šilavotas police in June 1941 and of systematically taking part in the execution of Soviet citizens from June to October, when between 7,000 and 8,000 people were killed”.<sup>13</sup> Leonas Mazūras was convicted of “joining white partisan troops [...] and of escorting unarmed civilians to the execution site”.<sup>14</sup> Jonas Narkevičius was convicted of “creating unbearable conditions for the arrested citizens” and “giving orders to shoot at prisoners who tried to escape” while serving as commandant at Riešė concentration camp.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Jonas Stanišauskas was convicted, among other things, of “guarding Kaunas Ghetto and taking part in the execution of ghetto inmates”.<sup>16</sup>

Some sentences referred to Jews indirectly, accentuating other aspects of their identity with terms such as Soviet citizens of Jewish origin, civilians of Jewish origin, and people of Jewish origin. For example, Jonas Alutis was convicted of “guarding German warehouses and arresting Soviet citizens, among them – people of Jewish origin”.<sup>17</sup> Stasys Skabeika was convicted of “arresting civilians of Jewish origin in Vilnius” and of “appointing policemen under his subordination to guard them (civilians of Jewish origin) in the ghetto and to escort them to the execution site”.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Ričardas Ukeniekas was convicted of “escorting civilians of Jewish origin [...] and guarding them before the execution”.<sup>19</sup>

10 Quoted from the Supreme Court ruling of 5 June 2008, Lietuvos Ypatingasis Archyvas [Lithuanian Special Archives, hereafter LYA], f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 373, 12.

11 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 391, 70.

12 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 214 (215), 10.

13 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 260, 8. Later in the text this was formulated as: “cooperated with Nazi Germany in the crimes of genocide and took part in the mass killing of Soviet citizens, mostly Jews, near Marijampolė in November 1941”.

14 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 019, 18.

15 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 106, 9.

16 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 360, 12.

17 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 198, 13.

18 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 404, 42.

19 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 395, 37.

Some convictions referred directly to Jews. For example, Albinas Jurčiukonis was convicted of “serving in the Nazi police and arresting, in cooperation with Nazi soldiers, around 100 Jewish families”.<sup>20</sup> Mostly, however, the Holocaust remained invisible. ‘Jews’ were covered up with different euphemisms as Soviet citizens, Soviet citizens of Jewish origin, Lithuanian inhabitants of Jewish origin, unarmed civilians, ghetto inmates, arrested people, and so on, thus making the Holocaust invisible as an ethnically motivated crime and framing it as a Nazi crime against the Soviet people, motivated by anti-Soviet ideology.

Local Nazi collaborators were mostly convicted of anti-Soviet activities. The sentences, which often extended back into the prewar period and covered the collaborators’ patriotic activities, portrayed the defendants as nationalists, patriots of Lithuania, and enemies of the Soviet regime, thus producing something close to patriotic biographies. This had a significant impact on the perception of their crimes later, during the post-1990 period after the declaration of Lithuanian independence, while until 1990, the issue remained largely undiscussed.

### A Ban on Speech: Institutional and Social Silencing

While Western European countries had, at least to certain degree, openly discussed the crimes of Nazis and their collaborators, Soviet rule, with state control and censorship, blocked free communication and free discussions among the citizens. Thus, the involvement of Soviet citizens in the Holocaust, their crimes, and their sentences were almost never discussed. Anne-Marie Roviello, in her interpretation of Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism, called this “a ban on speech” – a situation where “it is specifically prohibited to talk about this violence, recount it, or make it into an object of interest”.<sup>21</sup>

According to Arendt (1959), totalitarian regimes force people to live in conformity with ideological requirements. The Soviet state, in order to preserve the image of fraternity amongst the Soviet people, avoided escalating issues of crime, conflict, and violence in society. The death sentences were kept secret and even close family members were not informed. Before 1956, citizens whose relatives or family members were sentenced to death and executed were typically given a standard answer to their queries, such as “sentenced for ten years without the right to correspondence”. After 1956, official Soviet policy was to inform people that “the person was sentenced for ten years of imprisonment without the right to correspondence and died in prison”.<sup>22</sup> Families were banned from having any access to the fate of their fathers and grandfathers. If the family members were persistent and kept sending enquiries, the ‘death’ was ‘registered’ at the Civil Registry Office and relatives were given a death certificate.<sup>23</sup>

According to Burauskaitė, there are more than 100 known cases in Lithuania in which people were presented with false information, i.e. given a false death certifi-

20 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 369, 26.

21 Roviello/Temerson, *The Hidden Violence of Totalitarianism*, 927.

22 Secret letter from Ivan Serov, formal head of the KGB, to Nikolai Bulganin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, written in 1956, first published in: *Memorial-Aspekt 1* (1993) and *Memorial-Aspekt 10* (1994), quoted in: Teresė Burauskaitė, *Mirties nuosprendžiai ir jų vykdymas 1941–1944 m. Teisinis-politinis aspektas* [Death Sentences and Executions 1941–1944. Legal and Political Aspects], in: *Antikomunistinis kongresas ir tarptautinio Vilniaus visuomeninio tribunolo procesas. Komunizmo nusikaltimų įvertinimas* [Anti-Communist Congress and the International Vilnius Public Tribunal Process. Investigating the Crimes of Communism], Vilnius 2002, 161.

23 *Ibid.*, 161.

cate, and there was no way for them to learn about their sentenced and executed relatives.<sup>24</sup>

In the Soviet bloc, Gulag survivors, deportees, political prisoners, and their surviving families were subjected to silence, enforced through a “volatile combination of internal and external suppression”.<sup>25</sup> External suppression refers to legal restrictions, as some of the political prisoners were “subject to a ‘gag rule’; they were asked to sign documents saying they would not talk about their experiences in prison or the Gulag”.<sup>26</sup> Jehanne Gheith mentioned a female political prisoner who was released from prison and requested to sign a confirmation that she would not tell anyone about having been in prison, to which she responded with surprise: “Now I was supposed to return to work and where had I been for 3 years?”<sup>27</sup>

At the ideological level, trauma, grief, and mourning were interpreted as a lack of enthusiasm for and faith in socialist ideals, making the subject ideologically suspicious.<sup>28</sup> People therefore tried to suppress these feelings and to silence these histories, both for self-protection and the protection of their children.

Whereas external suppression operated at the level of institutional pressure, internal suppression operated at the social level as a fear of losing one’s job, friends, reputation, and social status in general. People remained silent about their past or their parents’ or grandparents’ past for a variety of reasons – in order to fit in, to be accepted by society, due to shame, for fear of further political persecution, due to social and political pressures, being dependent on the state and motivated by economic necessities, and so on.

In contrast to Western European countries, the Soviet societies were ideologically censored, the Holocaust remained represented strictly according to ideological guidelines, and the Soviet context was characterised by a lack of open discussions about Soviet citizens’ involvement in the Holocaust. This silence was reinforced at every level – political, institutional, social, personal, and so on.

### Dynamics within the Family: The Conspiracy of Silence

In the Soviet bloc, the families of the sentenced Nazi collaborators were subjected to the rule of silence just like everyone else. What happens to families affected by trauma or tragedy, especially when the trauma cannot be discussed?

Typically, all families develop a certain homeostasis, i.e. a relatively consistent set of internal family rules, roles, and boundaries that provide the family with stability and equilibrium.<sup>29</sup> When families are affected by traumas and tragedies, such as crime, suicide, alcoholism, and so on, when a family member is lost or unable to perform their role within the family, the equilibrium within the family is damaged. Then, in order to re-establish the balance, people have to revise the rules, roles, and identities. In cases where families are unwilling or unable to discuss trauma and to perform the emotional labour required due to social shaming or political censorship, families develop a pathological homeostasis. Pathological homeostasis is based

24 Burauskaitė, *Mirties nuosprendžiai ir jų vykdymas*, 161.

25 Jehanne M. Gheith, “I Never Talked”. *Enforced Silence, Non-Narrative Memory, and the Gulag*, in: *Mortality* 12 (2007) 2, 159-175, here 165.

26 *Ibid.*, 164.

27 Gheith, “I Never Talked”, 165.

28 Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone*, New York 2001.

29 Don D. Jackson, *The Question of Family Homeostasis*, in: *International Journal of Family Therapy* 3 (1981), 5-15; Joseph H. Brown/Dana N. Christensen, *Family Therapy Theory and Practice*, New Delhi 2007.

on epistemological error, i.e. denial, ignorance, misinterpretation, half-lies, and false beliefs that allow the family to maintain the imagined normalcy of everyday life and to go on without facing and accepting the change.<sup>30</sup> Sandra Butler in her theory on trauma called this a “conspiracy of silence”: Motivated by shame and social pressure, families make attempts to cover the trauma and maintain the imagined normalcy of everyday life, instead of trying to face and resolve it.<sup>31</sup>

This is what happened to the families of Nazi collaborators in Soviet Lithuania. As open discussions were discouraged, both politically and psychologically, the children of Nazi collaborators grew up surrounded by silence, ignorance, distorted realities, half-lies, partial knowledge, and false beliefs.

Many knew little or nothing about their parents’ or grandparents’ past and referred to the postwar years of silence and the culture of silence. For example, Aleksas Bečelis’s daughter said: “You know, we are postwar children. We did not know many things.”<sup>32</sup> According to Jonas Stanišauskas’s daughter: “Those were Stalin’s times”,<sup>33</sup> while Albinas Jurčiukonis’s daughter reported: “You understand, earlier, in Soviet times, people who were deported and [people] from my husband’s side, they avoided talking about [these times].”<sup>34</sup>

Within these families, part of the children’s socialisation was learning to be disinterested, not to ask questions, and not to trigger pathological homeostasis. Some people did refer to not being interested because of their young age, like Kazys Survila’s child, who said: “I was a child and I did not care.”<sup>35</sup> Aleksas Bečelis’s daughter said: “We were children. We did not pay attention.”<sup>36</sup> However, it is more likely that they were socialised into being disinterested. For example, Jonas Alutis’s daughter I.G. recalled that she was told “not to ask” such questions: “No, she [the mother] told us not to ask, as she did not know anything.”<sup>37</sup> Jonas Stanišauskas’s daughter said: “Our father’s brother, a famous photographer in Kaunas, now dead, warned us – don’t tell anything about your father.”<sup>38</sup>

For them, their parents’ or grandparents’ past remained a taboo subject. Silence permeated the entire social fabric, at every level. No one talked – neighbours did not talk, schoolfriends did not talk, family members did not talk, nor the sentenced persons themselves. An anonymous person, allegedly Vytautas Striupas’s daughter, said that when her father came back from the camps, he refused to discuss the subject: “He told me absolutely nothing. He absolutely did not want to talk about it. I tried, but he did not talk and that’s all.”<sup>39</sup> Jonas Alutis’s daughter I.G. spoke of how she was sent from one relative to another, without success: “For example, I can’t [talk] about my dad, with my relatives, when we talk, with relatives on my father’s side [...] they tell me – why don’t you ask your mom? I say, I have asked, but mom did not want to talk, she does not talk, on that subject. You could not get anything from her.”<sup>40</sup> Kazys Survila’s child recalled how the entire community fell into oblivion regarding his father’s case: “Father came back [after serving his sentence], he was working in the

30 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind. Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, Chicago 1972.

31 Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence. The Trauma of Incest*, Volcano 1996, 215.

32 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 138.

33 *Ibid.*, 263.

34 *Ibid.*, 223.

35 *Ibid.*, 88.

36 *Ibid.*, 138.

37 *Ibid.*, 168.

38 *Ibid.*, 263.

39 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 216.

40 Interview with I.G., daughter of Jonas Alutis, 20 December 2019.

same town. No one said anything. [...] He came back when I was fourteen. I did not know who he was. No one talked.<sup>41</sup>

The interviewees believed that this silence was mostly due to fear or even the legal threat: “Nothing during these times, you know, nothing was discussed, it was scary to talk about it, you know we lived on packed bags, breadcrumbs, lard, clothes, you never knew when they would come and take you away [...] until Stalin’s death, afterwards it became easier, of course.”<sup>42</sup> “They [the returnees from the Gulag] had signed [a pledge] not to tell. There was criminal responsibility, I don’t remember the article, but I know for sure. For everyone who was deported or imprisoned.”<sup>43</sup>

A.J.’s father came back from the Gulag in 1956 and refused to remain silent about his camp experiences. He died in a car accident in 1976, but A.J. believed he was killed and that the car accident was staged: “S. Braga, when he came back from prison, was openly talking about his experience in the camps. He was warned about this by the KGB many times. In 1975, he was killed. Clearly, [they] were afraid of the truth.”<sup>44</sup> Clearly, there was a conspiracy that silence must be preserved and that those who violated the taboo and spoke out would be punished.

Mostly, the taboo operated without explanations: “Whenever you asked why he was deported, you were told, don’t think about it, and all the deportees, whoever – my parents, my husband’s parents, everyone – nothing – it was forbidden to talk about that subject.”<sup>45</sup>

As Arendt argued in her analysis of totalitarianism, totalitarian propaganda “rests precisely on the elimination of that reality.”<sup>46</sup> This is exactly what happened to the local Nazi collaborators – their stories were not falsified, they were simply reduced to taboo subjects, made unspeakable, and simply eliminated.

## A Narrative Approach: Coping with an Inconvenient Past

Within families that operate on the basis of a taboo, communication is distorted, and in each family it is distorted in its own way. How do families cope with the loss or unexplained disappearance of family members and how do they deal with uncertainty? How do families tell their stories to themselves, to their younger generation, and to others, without triggering the forbidden content? This section presents several stories, each illuminating different strategies of coping.

### I. Family Myth: “No Politics”

One way to narrate family history without triggering taboo subjects is the suspension of political elements. N.J., the daughter of Boleslovas Mažeika, wrote in a letter to the Supreme Court in September 1990 about the arrest and ten-year absence of her father as follows:

“My father Mažeika Bolesas, born in 1898, was working at the railroad in 1945. During the summer of 1945 – at that time we lived in Baisogala, Kėdainių district – a stranger came to our house, dressed as an officer, and said: Mažeika, prepare yourself, there will be a train this afternoon, and you

41 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 88.

42 Interview with V.J.M., son of Juozas Mažeikis, 13 January 2020.

43 Interview with Edmundas Jakubauskas, grandson of Vladas Jakubauskas, rehabilitated, 6 November 2019.

44 A.J., letter to the Supreme Court of Lithuania, 10 June 1996, LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.005, 151(7)-153(9).

45 Interview with G.J.K., daughter of Albinas Jurčiukonis, 13 January 2020.

46 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego 1979, 384.

will have to come with me, to Jonava. When the train arrived, the train station was completely empty, there were no passengers there, and my dad was hesitant and he did not know what to do. The train had already started to move and then the officer appeared and they both – my father and the officer jumped on the train. [...]. Since then, we did not see our father for ten years. For a very long time, we did not know where he was and for what he had been taken away from home. After some time, we received a letter from him from Raseiniai prison. Later, letters from camps in Omsk and Tomsk arrived. He came back home in the spring of 1957.<sup>47</sup>

This story is based on two taboos: the first being the crime committed by the father (war crimes or genocide), the second being the violence committed by the state (arrest and imprisonment). The daughter is fully aware of the events, even minor details, like the specific time and place, or the train station being empty, but the narrative is totally devoid of any political content.

Further, the story has a rigid structure based on the following elements: exposition (a railroad worker doing his job during a regular summer day), rising action (a stranger in an officer's uniform knocks on the door), complication (the stranger demands that he go to Jonava), peak or climax (the empty station, the stranger is not there, the train already starts to move, the stranger appears in the very last moment and both, stranger and father, jump on the train), reversal (the first letters arrive), falling action (waiting for the father to come back), and resolution (the father comes back after ten years of absence). The structure is very rigid, there is no space for spontaneity, which implies that the structure was established through multiple repetitions and remains the only way to tell the story.

Yet the story reported in Vinokuras's book in 2017, either by the same person or another sibling, had already changed: "I was six years old when two armed men came in and took him away [...]. I know he was arrested. They took him out of bed, took him away, and no one knows what happened later. [...] I remember the night when he was gone."<sup>48</sup> Following the weakening of censorship, both internal and external, the elements of terror and violence and the awareness of the arrest were incorporated back into the narrative.

## 2. Family Myth: "Grandpa is Still Alive"

Juozas Gruodis was sentenced to death in 1951 by the Soviet military tribunal for cooperation with Nazi Germany and for the crime of genocide. According to the legal regulations of the time, the relatives of the sentenced person were not informed, or they were informed that the person "was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment without the right to correspondence."<sup>49</sup> Gruodis's three daughters grew up believing their father was alive somewhere in Russia in secret, highly protected mining facilities. As Gruodis's granddaughter reported:

"In the family, there was hope all the time, there was the idea that he was still alive, that he was in a mining facility. Now I know where all this came from, from that period, that they, the political prisoners, how to call them, they were taken to Russia and were working in mining facilities, there were some conversations like that, maybe even my grandmother told me that. The hope that he was still alive, it was there all the time, and my mother used to say,

47 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 355, 9.

48 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 267.

49 See: Burauskaitė, *Mirties nuosprendžiai ir jų vykdymas*, 161.

look, if your grandfather came back now, and she was laughing, I can't recall the context. In some way, mother was expecting him to come back."<sup>50</sup>

It is unclear whether the family was aware, partially aware, or unaware of the execution, but the grandfather's death was never openly spoken about. This allowed the family to maintain pathological homeostasis – the father, although physically absent, remained symbolically present as he might return at any moment, or especially during significant moments in the family, so the family did not have to face grief and mourning or adapt to new roles such as widow, orphan, and so on.

This homeostasis lasted after 1990 and up to 2000, when someone from the family discovered in the archives that the father had been executed in 1951: "We went to the archives after the declaration of independence, I think it was after 2000 [. . .]. When we learned, when we found the death certificate in the archives – when we learned, we were shocked, I remember that very well, it was, well, it was shock, well, shock."<sup>51</sup>

At the time the interview was conducted in 2020, the granddaughter was not yet aware of the Soviet practice of misinforming people about their executed relatives.

### 3. Family Myth: A Fatal Mistake

Jonas Dačiola was convicted of collaboration with the Nazis and sentenced to death in 1943 and executed in 1944 by the Soviet war tribunal. His family received no official information about the father's disappearance; his wife repeatedly requested information from the local authorities, but with no success. Soon, the entire family were deported to Siberia and came back in 1951. Then, the wife began searching for her husband again. She received unofficial oral testimonies that her husband had been executed, yet the state authorities remained silent and only in 1956 was she given a death certificate, saying that Dačiola had died due to heart failure in 1944.

It was typical at that time not to inform the relatives of executions or, after 1956, to provide them with false death certificates referring to natural causes.<sup>52</sup> So the family, while facing controversial explanations, developed a narrative of its own: Jonas Dačiola was the best friend and right-hand man to a local Jew, the mill owner Maizelis, so he could not have been involved in the Holocaust, but had been mistaken for his brother Alfonsas, who served in the Nazi police and was involved in the mass extermination of Jews and executed. According to the family, the state authorities tried to cover up the mistake twice: First, they tried to silence the wife by sending her to Siberia, and then they issued a false death certificate.<sup>53</sup>

The family narrative included several unvalidated episodes. The first was when a certain procurator from Pakruojis told the family members that "Maizelis's relatives from Israel have visited Lithuania and they have praised Jonas Dačiola very much". The second was an unspecified witness reporting an incident at the execution site: "After Jonas Dačiola was brought to the place of execution, at the moment of execution, a rider, a man on a horse, came with a message, i.e. a list of people who were not guilty and had to be exempted from execution, and he called Jonas's name, but Jonas was already dead."<sup>54</sup>

The family story was elaborated, through multiple repetitions, into a myth, i.e. a narrative with a stable structure – exposition (a decent person with good relations to

50 Interview with R.K., granddaughter of Juozas Gruodis, 9 January 2020.

51 Ibid.

52 See: Burauskaitė, *Mirties nuosprendžiai ir jų vykdymas*, 161.

53 This story is reconstructed from the 1997 testimonies of Dačiola's sons, Jonas and Romualdas and the letters of his wife (date illegible) and his daughter-in-law, LYA, f.L-1, Ap.58-B, 2, 90(84), 91(85), 8(12).

54 Interview with V.P., granddaughter of Jonas Dačiola, 14 January 2020.

a local Jew), rising action (war, a brother involved with the Nazis), complication (being mistaken for his brother), climax (a message that Dačiola is innocent arrives right after the execution), reversal (in order to silence the family searching for the truth, they are deported and issued a false death certificate), falling action (the witness reports an incident at the execution site, the procurator reports Maizelis's ancestors having a positive opinion about Dačiola), and resolution (formal rehabilitation is not achieved, but the family has established its own narrative and comes to terms with the past).

The rehabilitation appeals were rejected and the Supreme Court stated in its decision of 30 October 1997 that “there is controversial evidence regarding Jonas Dačiola’s death” but they failed to clarify the controversies, leaving the family in confusion.<sup>55</sup> In response to the incongruities, the family relied on their own narrative: “One day, we just gave up and said to ourselves: in our memories and the stories that people tell, there is another version. Of course, you can’t know the truth. [...] But we believe it was a mistake. As do our relatives and friends.”<sup>56</sup>

#### 4. Family Myth: The Tragic Hero

Jonas Narkevičius was a non-commissioned officer and recipient of multiple state awards in interwar Lithuania.<sup>57</sup> After the Nazi occupation, he joined the punitive battalion, made an oath to Nazi Germany, served as commandant of the Riešė concentration camp, and authorised his subordinates to shoot prisoners who attempted to escape. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1945.

According to family interpretations, the father was taken prisoner of war and placed into the position of camp commandant, i.e. something he had no possibility to refuse. The father’s innocence was supported by his alleged lack of agency and the selective observation that he personally did not kill anyone, although he authorised others to kill. For the family, the father remained a tragic hero, who was forced to act against his own high moral standards and had to pay for this with moral suffering and later with his life:

“He took everything to heart, my mother said, he could not sleep at night, [...] they did not kill at the beginning [...]. When he learned what was happening, it was too late to step back, there was no way back, he was already stuck there [...]. Such a good person, but he got into trouble. Some years in prison or something, that’s ok for now, but execution, oh Lord, for what? There is a letter from the Supreme Court saying he did not kill. [...] He did not kill but he was killed himself.”<sup>58</sup>

The family history is clearly structured into the time before and the time after the loss of the father. Before the “incident”, as the daughter called it, the family had a good life in Vilnius. This ideal life was interrupted when the father did not come to pick up his daughter from the playground, as he usually did. When the other children were taken home, she was left alone, it was getting dark, and she had to make her way home on her own. The abandonment she experienced then became a central theme in her life: “And I am waiting, and all the other kids have gone home already,

55 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 051 (52, 53), 1-2.

56 Interview with V.P., granddaughter of Jonas Dačiola, 14 January 2020.

57 “Well, how to say, he was a [non-commissioned] officer, there are medals and awards. There’s a letter, it says, the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas, it says, the medal of the Order, here a decree from the President of Lithuania for senior non-commissioned officer Jonas Narkevičius for services to his country, rewarded with the Medal of the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas III Class, and here we have some more awards”. Interview with R.Ž., daughter of Jonas Narkevičius, 22 January 2020.

58 Ibid.

and my dad is not there, and I am thinking: I need to go home [on my own] – so I went home on my own and asked, where is my dad, and dad was not there, and we have not seen him anymore.”<sup>59</sup>

This event signifies the beginning of the family’s decline. From fear of persecution, they left their home in Vilnius and went into hiding, the family members living separately at certain times and reuniting later. The mother never had a legal job again in her lifetime, to remain invisible, and the brother began at the age of sixteen to work and provide for the family.

As Boym argued, nostalgia is always the product of the present.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the idealised image of the father here, a symbol of the good life the family once had, is produced retrospectively in the context of hardship and suffering: “All the bad things, all our bad fate ... The family was dispersed, destroyed, mother there, we were hiding somewhere else. [...] Our life was very, very hard, complicated, and it all began with that incident, our dad, our loss. [...] When dad was alive, we lived happily, normally, but when he lost him, everything [went wrong].”<sup>61</sup>

This is a kind of inherited nostalgia, i.e. a longing for things one does not remember directly but knows from one’s parents – the image of the father is based less on personal memories than on the mother’s narrative:

“My mother, she approved and defended him in every way. All the relatives, they used to say that father would not harm a fly. [...] I remember he used to take me everywhere, to all the churches in Vilnius, I was still a child, he took me to a confectionary, such memories [...]. Dad was very precious to me, more so than my mother. [...] He was a very good father, my mom and all of them, they were four sisters, they all praised him very much.”<sup>62</sup>

Abandonment became the central theme of the daughter’s life. Even general difficulties of the postwar period, childhood illnesses, and her mother’s aging and death were seen from this point of view. These were moments of vulnerability in which the father’s absence was intensely felt. She reported that after the father’s arrest, when the family went into hiding, “I was given up to my mother’s sisters in Kaunas. I became very ill, it was scarlet fever. I was supposed to die, people said, she is going to die [...]. But somehow, I survived ...”<sup>63</sup>

At the age of eighty, she has not yet come to terms with the arrest and loss of her father nor with her father’s crimes:

“Now, my whole body is shaking when I think about all these issues, you know it was very hard to survive [...]. And now, while we are talking, I am just not myself, I feel like I am losing myself, when I remember all these horrible things [...]. And for me, now, my heart is trembling, unpleasant, scary, Jesus, I had already forgotten all these issues, I said everything is over.”<sup>64</sup>

The family was not officially informed about the execution. One day, the mother returned from prison carrying the father’s shirt, which was stained with blood, and she speculated that her husband might have been tortured.<sup>65</sup> The family lived either in denial or in partial awareness, as the daughter said: “We still did not believe he was

59 Ibid.

60 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2002.

61 Interview with R.Ž., daughter of Jonas Narkevičius, 22 January 2020.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 “My mother went to Lukiškės [prison] to bring some food. She was given back father’s shirts. She said they were dirty with blood, maybe he was tortured there, and she cried so much when she came home, and I have not seen him since, only [his image] in my memories.” Ibid.

executed, but, of course, if he were alive, we would have heard from him somehow”. Only years later did a family friend inform them that their father had been executed: “I was a full adult already when I learned [about my father’s execution].”<sup>66</sup>

During her formative years, the daughter did not have a possibility to come to terms with her father’s crimes and his death. The family developed an idealised image of the father in response to trauma and poverty, and by the time she learned the truth, the myth of her father as a hero and her own identity based on that myth had already been consolidated.

### 5. Family Story: Abandonment

During the Second World War, Jonas Bečelis voluntarily joined the 13<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Lithuanian police. He was responsible for guarding the Kaunas Ghetto, conveyed Jewish citizens to the execution sites, took part in punitive actions against civilians of Jewish origin, and as a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> battalion took part in the execution of 800 Jewish citizens. In 1945, he was sentenced to twenty years in camps, served ten years, and came back in 1955.

Upon his return, Bečelis arrived in a local village to conduct electrification, had an affair with a young widow with two small kids, and married her after she got pregnant. After the daughter was born, Bečelis got a job offer in the city and invited his wife to go with him, assuming she would abandon her two kids from her first marriage, leave them at their grandparents’ place, and take only the youngest daughter with them. His wife refused to do so, and so he abandoned her, now with three children. Bečelis made no further contact except for regular money transfers. The story was perceived as shameful and was never discussed in order not to trigger the mother’s pain:

“We knew nothing, because he left, he abandoned us. My mother was very badly hurt and she raised all of us on her own. [...] For my mother, it was a complete shock, as [he] said, I am leaving you and the children and I am going, and later ... inhuman, totally inhuman ... [...] And for me it was painful, for he hurt my mother, abandoned her ...”<sup>67</sup>

The father was eliminated from the cognitive landscape and made into a taboo subject not because of his war crimes, but because of his moral crime, namely the betrayal and abandonment of the family. Neither the father nor his political past were ever discussed within the family.

### The Core Experience: Abandonment and Uncertainty

What are the major emotional experiences of the (grand)children of Nazi collaborators? Taking into account the political context – the framing of Nazi collaborators as enemies of the Soviet state and treating their families accordingly, institutional silence, censorship, and the distorted dynamics within families – most of the (grand)children were burdened not by their (grand)parents’ crimes, but by their own feelings of abandonment and uncertainty.

With their parents having simply disappeared, many people grew up feeling abandoned. As Juozas Guzevičius’s child said: “I was abandoned at the age of two

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with N.B.J., daughter of Jonas Bečelis, 19 January 2020.

months”.<sup>68</sup> Jonas Alutis’s daughter I.G. said: “[Father] left us”.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Mindaugas Jankūnas’s daughter V.P. stated that her father had been “taken away”.<sup>70</sup>

The fathers’ unexplained disappearance resulted not only in feelings of abandonment, but also in other hardships, such as families having to go into hiding to avoid deportation, losing their homes due to property confiscation, alienation from their relatives, poverty, children failing to receive an education, and career possibilities being restricted due to the fathers’ past.

Jonas Alutis’s daughter I.G. said:

“Russians came and they took the father away and told us to leave the room. [...] My mother said, I took you both [the two children] by the hand and walked away [...]. We grew up, life was hard. [...] Mother raised us both alone. Luckily, father’s sister took us into her house, we lived at her place. As I know, mother was unemployed, with two kids, my brother and I. Mother used to go to help other people with their gardens, just to get some grain or a drop of milk.”<sup>71</sup>

Juozas Batutis’s daughter J.O.A. wrote a letter to the Supreme Court in September 2009 stating: “My mom also lived with threats saying she would be deported to Siberia or killed by shooting. All I know and all I remember is that I was very much afraid for we might be deported or even killed, and I used to cry and ask ‘God’ that we could stay at home.”<sup>72</sup>

Leonas Mazūras’s son said he felt discriminated due to his father’s past: “All my life, I had to suffer because of that. We were deported and later I was condemned because of that. [...] When I applied to the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute, they did not admit me at first. They said outright: ‘You can’t be an engineer, you can’t construct military objects with this biography [meaning the father].”<sup>73</sup>

Jonas Stanišauskas’s daughter J.U. wrote a letter to the Supreme Court on 30 May 2007 stating: “I could not study because we had to hide. My mother could not work and support me. My childhood was horrible.” Then, in a letter dated 23 June 2007, she stated: “I only graduated four classes in the village school.”<sup>74</sup> In 2017, she told Vinokuras: “I wanted to live with my paternal grandparents, but by mother did not let me go. She said my father was a criminal and we had to go into hiding because of him.”<sup>75</sup>

Most children were traumatised not by their fathers’ crimes, but by the silence and incomprehensibility of what was happening. R.Z., daughter of Jonas Narkevičius’s daughter R.Z. asked in her letter to the Supreme Court in October 2010: “And what about the suffering of our family [...]? We had to hide from deportations, we had to escape from Vilnius, to Verkiai, to Kaunas. My mother was totally broken. We lived on the edge, all the time. And for what sins?”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Leonas Mazūras’s son said:

68 Vinokuras *Mes nežudėme*, 182.

69 *Ibid*, 169.

70 *Ibid*, 142.

71 Interview with I.G., daughter of Jonas Alutis, 20 December 2019.

72 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 392, 1-2.

73 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 257. Leonas Mazūras was deported for ten years together with his family. His son grew up in Siberia and they only spoke about the issues after the family came back to Lithuania and their son was already an adult facing career difficulties due to his father’s past. The father was convicted of escorting people to the execution site. The father’s version of events is that he did not know about the planned executions and that when he learned about the execution, he refused to kill and withdrew.

74 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 360, 1-3.

75 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 263.

76 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 106, 1-2.

“One day, I talked to my father, yes, because it was very painful for me to suffer, all my life, and not knowing for what.”<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, since death sentences were carried out in secrecy and the families were banned from having any information about the person’s fate, their children did not have a chance to face and accept their fathers’ death and the normal way of mourning or to mourn in a normal way, so they experienced a postponed or unaccomplished process of mourning.

As Arendt argued, totalitarianism takes away not only life, but also death, i.e. totalitarianism, “by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive), robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual’s own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one.”<sup>78</sup> Arendt was speaking primarily of concentration camps, yet the same is applicable in the case of local Nazi collaborators in Soviet Lithuania, as their families were banned from any access to their fathers’ fates.

Death is not only a physical but also a social process, i.e. being informed about death, becoming aware, burying, mourning, accepting, securing a certain memory of the deceased, and so on. For these children, their fathers did not die, they just disappeared. Without knowing when and how their fathers died or where their graves were, the children were not able to reconcile either with their ancestors’ death or with their crimes.

Jonas Narkevičius’s daughter R.Ž. said during the interview: “Absolutely nothing, no grave, nothing, he was executed and that’s all [...]. I have a brother’s grave, I have a mother buried there, she died in 1997 at the age of 91, and I have their graves, but I do not have my father’s grave. [...] Nothing, no body, no message, no grave.”<sup>79</sup> Jonas Dačiola’s granddaughter V.P. said: “My dad’s last wish before his death was to find the grave of our grandparent and we tried.”<sup>80</sup> Juozas Gruodis’s granddaughter R.K. stated in a letter to the Supreme Court in April 2003: “Our family lives in uncertainty for so many years. We don’t know where our grandfather’s grave is. In fact, we do not know when, specifically, he died. [...] Is there a possibility to get information about his burial place?”<sup>81</sup>

(Grand)children were burdened not by their (grand)parents’ crimes, but rather by incomprehensibility and powerlessness. They did not know what happened, why it happened, or for what reason it happened, and felt like they had no explanation or control over the events. Likewise, they were not informed about the deaths of their (grand)parents and suffered prolonged and incomplete grief and mourning.

### Years of Independence: Remembering and Reconsidering

The fall of the Soviet system, democratisation, the end of censorship, and the revival of nationalism brought an immense change to all spheres of life. In this context, the ban on language, to rephrase Roviello, was removed, archives were opened, and the past – including the crimes of people sentenced for collaboration with the Nazis – had to be reassessed.

77 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 257.

78 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 452.

79 Interview with R.Ž., daughter of Jonas Narkevičius, 22 January 2020.

80 Interview with V.P., granddaughter of Jonas Dačiola, 14 January 2020.

81 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.260, 1.

This section covers the post-Soviet developments – the opening of archives, legal revisionism, the openly expressed distrust towards the Soviet jurisdiction, and (grand)children’s confrontations with their (grand)parents’ past.

### Legal Revisionism: Opening the Historical Debates

With the declaration of Lithuanian independence, political sentences passed by the Soviet legal system came under review, as the cases of political prisoners, deportees, and executed citizens were to be revised. The major legal instruments for the rehabilitation of people sentenced by the Soviet authorities for resistance against the occupational regimes were adopted in 1989, 1990 (revised in 1998), and 2008.

The core idea expressed in these documents was that Lithuanian citizens sentenced by occupational regimes, either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, for their acts of resistance against the occupational regime, were declared not guilty, their full rights were restored, and they (or their surviving relatives) were entitled to financial compensations, except for people who were sentenced for war crimes.

Although the legal instruments clearly state that people sentenced for war crimes cannot be rehabilitated, in practice this did not always work. The responsible institutions, namely the prosecutor’s office, the Supreme Court, and the Ministry of the Interior, were overwhelmed with appeals and did not have full access to KGB files.<sup>82</sup> As Rūta Vanagaitė noted: “The commissions responsible for rehabilitation were made up of very few people, the responses were due in three weeks, the appeals came huge amounts, thousands, and a case contained from one to seven or twelve volumes, each volume consisting of several hundred pages.”<sup>83</sup> Rimvydas Valentukevičius, the former chief prosecutor of the Special Investigation Department at the prosecutor’s office, said: “When the process began, there was no access to KGB archives, so basically, rehabilitation was performed nearly automatically, upon the relatives’ request, and [...] many were rehabilitated for no reason.”<sup>84</sup>

Later, when it became obvious that many rehabilitated people had been involved in war crimes in general and in the Holocaust in particular, the reverse mechanism, namely the process of de-rehabilitation, was approved, although it became complicated and technically impossible to revise all the cases a second time: “Up to 2011, there were 227 people de-rehabilitated, the number is not final, but for sure, the number is not big. [...] And rehabilitations, oh, thousands, there, you know thousands, no one can tell you now.”<sup>85</sup>

If not performed automatically, the rehabilitation process was extremely complex, which is well illustrated by the case of Stanislovas Braga. Braga was sentenced to 25 years in camps, served part of his sentence, came back to Lithuania around 1960, and died in a car accident around 1976.<sup>86</sup> His children, A.J. and J.B., wrote multiple appeals for rehabilitation – the first was written and rejected in 1991, the second was written and rejected again in 1996, and then the daughter submitted the third appeal and requested extra investigation, and Braga was rehabilitated on 16 January 1997.<sup>87</sup>

82 Interview with Rimvydas Valentukevičius, former chief prosecutor of the Special Investigation Department at the prosecutor’s office, 16 January 2020.

83 Rūta Vanagaitė, *Mūsiškiai* [Our People], Vilnius 2016, 249.

84 Interview with Rimvydas Valentukevičius, former chief prosecutor of the Special Investigation Department at the prosecutor’s office, 16 January 2020.

85 *Ibid.*

86 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.005, 9 (1530).

87 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.005, 23 (167).

Consequently, some children believed that rehabilitation was just a matter of persistence and the availability of legal assistance and claimed that although they had no means to engage in a legal struggle, they considered their (grand)parents to be innocent not on a legal, but on a moral level.

### Questioning the Legacy of the Soviet Jurisdiction

One of the main reasons why people have difficulties in coming to terms with their parents' and grandparents' past is the general distrust towards the Soviet state legal system and the Soviet jurisdiction.

In their appeal letters, people referred to the political bias in the Soviet courts, the use of torture for obtaining confessions, or just to the general conditions of illegality, where one could be sentenced on the basis of gossip, false complaints, and without a lack of proper evidence, or to cases that were fabricated for political purposes in order to discredit Lithuanian patriots.

Albinas Jurčiukonis's daughter G.J.K. wrote a letter to the Supreme Court in 2007 stating: "I want to draw your attention to the fact that the case of Albinas Jurčiukonis, born 1915, was fabricated by the institutions of the Soviet occupational regime, only because of his membership in the Riflemen's Union, his service in the police, and his participation in anti-Soviet resistance."<sup>88</sup>

Others rejected the legitimacy of the sentences due to the use of torture during interrogation. While torture was indeed applied during the Soviet era, this fact alone did not make the defendant innocent, but for many applicants the use of violence was evidence of their (grand)parents' innocence.

Juozas Gruodis granddaughter R.K. wrote a letter to the Supreme Court in 2003 stating: "Before writing my appeal for rehabilitation, I got acquainted with his case, number 35721/3. Now, we know how people were interrogated at that time and how their confessions were obtained, so there are no doubts that my grandfather was tortured. The interrogation protocols, consisting of two to three pages, produced at night, in six to ten hours, with my grandfather's signature becoming less and less visible on every page – obviously, his strength was declining."<sup>89</sup>

Albinas Jurčiukonis daughter G.J.K. wrote a letter to the Supreme Court in 2007 stating: "The accusations [...] are not supported by any evidence, except confessions obtained by force. Let's take the fact that the interrogation began on 16 March 1949 at 2 pm and lasted until 2:20 at night – this fact reminds us of the widely known methods of repressive Soviet methods, which allowed you to obtain any confession you wanted."<sup>90</sup>

Some others reduced the entire Soviet jurisdiction to a general condition of random terror and meta-illegality. Mykolas Jankūnas's daughter V.P. said: "You know, in those days, it was easy [to sentence]. They just said it, and that's all. No proof, no evidence."<sup>91</sup> Aleksandras Laimutis's daughter J.Š. said during court proceedings in 2008: "At that time, during the war [...] the witnesses might have testified whatever they were told or just to protect their families."<sup>92</sup> Later, she added: "You know, in the postwar years, someone filed a complaint, no one was interested whether you were

88 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.369, 1.

89 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.260, 1.

90 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.369, 1.

91 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 142.

92 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.372, 12.

guilty or not.”<sup>93</sup> Bronius Juškys’s daughter B.G. said: “Maybe some neighbours were angry and spread dirty gossip about him.”<sup>94</sup>

The denial of fathers’ or grandfathers’ crimes was based on distrust towards the Soviet system and deeply seated beliefs that the truth remained veiled beyond the official narratives. As Jonas Narkevičius’s daughter R.Ž. wrote in a letter to the Supreme Court in October 2000: “I believe more in my mother’s words than in Soviet documents.”<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Mykolas Jankūnas’s daughter V.P. said: “He was accused of that, but he has not a Jew shooter, for sure. My mother told me everything.”<sup>96</sup> Finally, Bronius Juškys’s daughter B.G. said: “My mother told me he did not kill these Jews.”<sup>97</sup>

When people are in denial, they are not only in denial of their (grand)fathers’ crimes, they are in denial of the legacy of the Soviet jurisdiction – in their own interpretation, a just sentence cannot be made by unjust authorities.

### Motivations for Appeal Letters: Reconciling with the Past

During the Soviet years, the (grand)children of Nazi collaborators grew up surrounded by silence, denial, family mythologies, partial awareness, or half-lies. After Lithuanian independence in 1990, when the political ban was lifted, the children started inquiring about the past and their (grand)fathers’ fates. The appeal letters reveal partial knowledge, selective remembrance, and complex emotional dynamics within families.

#### Dačiola’s Family: Trying to Resolve Ambiguities

Jonas Dačiola was executed in 1945. Dačiola’s wife received no official information, except gossip about the execution. She repeatedly enquired with the local authorities about the fate of her husband. Soon, the family was deported. They came back to Lithuania in 1951 and, after repeated enquiries, in 1956 she was given a death certificate referring to heart failure as the cause of death. Due to controversies, the family doubted this official version and developed a narrative of their own, believing that their father had been mistaken for his brother who had served the Nazis and that their father had been executed by mistake. The family was thus deported in order to silence them and the false death certificate was issued to cover up the mistake.

After 1990, the family learned from the archives that Dačiola had been sentenced to death. On 23 August 1997, Dačiola’s daughter-in-law wrote a letter to the Supreme Court addressing particular aspects like distrust in the Soviet jurisdiction, the suffering of her family, and specifically asking for clarification of the actual circumstances of Jonas Dačiola’s death: “How can the same person be a criminal, be sentenced and executed, and then die from a heart failure in his native village at home?”<sup>98</sup>

The Supreme Court stated that “there is controversial evidence regarding Jonas Dačiola’s death”, but failed to clarify these controversies and, during the interview, the family was not aware that misinforming relatives about executed citizens had been a normal practice around 1956.<sup>99</sup>

93 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 207.

94 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 229.

95 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.106, 1-2.

96 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 142.

97 Vinokuras, *Mes nežudėme*, 229.

98 LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 051, 52, 53, 1.

99 Supreme Court decision of 1997 10 30, LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 051 (52, 53), 1-2.

### Juozas Gruodis's Granddaughter: Family Myths versus Reality

Juozas Gruodis was sentenced to death and executed in 1951. Gruodis's family, following the typical practices of the time, was not informed, so his children and grandchildren grew up being told their grandfather must be alive somewhere in Russia in deeply protected industrial facilities. After 2000, the family learnt in the archives that their grandfather had in fact been executed.

Gruodis's granddaughter R.K. wrote in a letter to the Supreme Court in April 2003 stating: "The sentence states that the execution was carried out on 7 June 1951, but we received the information that Juozas Gruodis was working in some strictly protected mining facilities."<sup>100</sup>

Her letter contained typical components, such as disbelief in the Soviet jurisdiction, pity for the three orphaned daughters, and so on. Yet her major concern was the contradiction between the two narratives – the state narrative and the family narrative – and so she asked for the actual circumstances of her grandfather's death to be clarified and the uncertainties to be resolved.

### Juozas Narkevičius's Daughter: Seeking Personal Validation

Jonas Narkevičius was a Lithuanian officer who received high-level state awards in interwar Lithuania. During the Second World War, he ran Riešė concentration camp and was executed in 1945. His daughter grew up with an idealised image of her father as a tragic hero who was forced to act against his own will and against his own high moral standards due to the circumstances. This idealised image was consolidated due to the hardships of her fatherless life. In her appeal letter, the daughter wrote the following:

"[M]y father was an officer, not an ordinary person. [...] Furthermore, my father was a person with a sensitive soul and one can only imagine what he had to go through after seeing this reality? [...] I have never doubted the humanistic principles of my father, but how could the Lithuanians, who were occupied at that time, change or influence the situation? [...] And what about our family, my mother, my little brother (both are dead already) and me – what we had to go through? Hiding from deportations, escaping from Vilnius to Verkiai and later to Kaunas. My mother was totally broken. We lived in permanent uncertainty, and for what sins?"<sup>101</sup>

This letter of appeal contains two aspects, the first being the defence of the father, the second being the daughter's traumatic response to the loss of her father – a lack of awareness or partial awareness, family suffering, displacement, poverty, and an idealised image of her father, produced retrospectively in times of hardship. She failed to develop other alternatives – all the tragedies of her life were the consequence of and part of the original tragedy, the conviction of her father. For her, rehabilitating her father was the only way to resolve the trauma, which would validate the imagined cause of her sufferings.

### Jonas Bečelis's Daughter: Resolving the Trauma of Abandonment

Jonas Bečelis was sentenced in 1945 to twenty years in camps, but came back to Lithuania after serving only part of his sentence in 1955. His daughter was born from Bečelis's affair with a young widow who already had two children from an earlier marriage. The couple got married and Bečelis soon got job opportunities in a bigger

<sup>100</sup> LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b.260, p.1.

<sup>101</sup> R.Z.'s letter to Supreme Court of 16 October 2010, LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 106, 1-2.

city and invited his wife to start a new life, under the condition that she will abandon her two children from her former marriage. As she refused to do so, Bečelis abandoned the family and maintained no contact beyond regular money transfers.

His daughter wrote to the Supreme Court on 30 October 1990 stating: “Please explain this case and inform me about it” – she was thus not asking for rehabilitation, but for information of who her father was.

“I began to search, as I was working myself at eldership, and it was interesting for me. Then, I learned about the deportation and later there were all these changes [in 1990, RB], and I tried to find out what happened [...]. And then I learned this story, which is not nice [...]. I did not know this before, my mom never told me. I found records in the archive, [...] and I got records showing that reimbursement had been paid for the deportation for the second wife, and I got a death certificate. I have it now, I know when he died. For me, it was interesting, and I do not know myself if he – whether there were brothers or sisters – I know nothing about my paternal relatives, nothing.”<sup>102</sup>

It emerged that her father’s second wife had claimed all reimbursements after Bečelis was rehabilitated in 1991 (he was de-rehabilitated later), so the daughter was advised to seek legal assistance and claim part of the reimbursement. She refused to do so:

“I could, I was told, go to court and demand it, but I did not do it – it was too low for me, I think, oh Lord, for a few roubles there. [...] And if he abandoned us [...], I was too proud, go to hell, this money won’t bring me any luck, and he has hidden and erased me from his further life, and denigrated me in this way. So I said, let it be, I will live successfully on my own.”<sup>103</sup>

Her father’s criminal past served in a positive way to resolve the trauma and shame of abandonment. The primary trauma of abandonment – internalised guilt and shame about being worthless, being abandoned – was resolved when the daughter learned that her father had not been the kind of person she would have wanted as a father.

“You know, when I was a child, I used to think that maybe my life could have been different, I would have had better options, you know, as a child, I felt underprivileged, and for mother, it was very hard to raise all three of us kids alone. But, I am saying, our maternal grandparents supported us and we grew up [...]. And only later did I learn, when I had the materials from archives, I learned that he was deported, and this ugly story too.”<sup>104</sup>

Like many other children, she was traumatised not by her father’s crimes, but by his absence and abandonment. Thus, learning about her father was an attempt to reconstruct her family history and her own identity, as well as to resolve the trauma of abandonment. Since she was abandoned as a child by her father and grew up missing him, her father’s involvement in the Holocaust gave her a different frame of reference – that both she and her mother were in fact better off without him.

#### Jonas Stanišauskas’s Daughter: Compensation for a Fatherless Life

Jonas Stanišauskas was involved in mass executions of Jewish people during the Second World War, before joining the anti-Soviet partisan resistance, and was sentenced to death and executed in 1952. His daughter, J.N.U., who grew up in poverty

<sup>102</sup> Interview with N.B.J., daughter of Jonas Bečelis, 19 January 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

as a result and received a poor education, wrote in a letter to the Supreme Court on 23 June 2007:

“I can’t come to the court to hear the case of my father because of my health (I have diabetes, high blood pressure, and I need hip joint surgery). I already went to Vilnius (I live in Kaunas) a few times. I paid for the travel, I paid for written requests for archival data. My pension is only 360 litas, it is not enough to pay for my medicines and for my apartment. [...] I only graduated four classes in village school while living at my aunt’s place. My mother could not support me and I could not study. We had nowhere to live, my mother had no job, so we went into hiding. As I did not finish school, I had to work dead-end jobs all my life [...]. I trust in the Supreme Court and I believe, while making your decision, that you will take into account my troubled childhood and fatherless life.”<sup>105</sup>

In her letter, one of the central points was her own suffering, her troubled childhood and fatherless life. This gives a better understanding of the Soviet context: Since her father was sentenced and executed as an enemy of the Soviet state, it affected the family more than merely the loss of the father. The family was further stigmatised, lived in fear of further persecution, and experienced obstacles in achieving educational and professional success. So it was not the cause of the punishment (the father’s crimes), but the nature of the punishment (the stigmatisation of the family) that led to an intense feeling of victimhood among the children of Nazi collaborators.

#### Jonas Alutis’s Daughter: A Lack of Agency

Jonas Alutis was sentenced to ten years in camps with property confiscation and died in the camp. His daughter I.G. grew up in poverty and knowing nothing about her father. In 2002, I.G. was informed by the Supreme Court that her father’s case was going to be investigated. She responded with the following letter:

“Letter to the Chairman of Supreme Court.

I was informed that my dad’s case will be opened in the court on 19 December 2002. I am disabled and won’t be able to come to court due to my health condition. My disability pension is 249 litas only, so I cannot afford to hire legal assistance. I cannot even afford to buy most necessary medicines. After I pay the utility bills, the remaining amount is not even enough for modest subsistence and going somewhere is out of the question.

I trust in your will, whatever your decision will be. Please be nice and, when you close the case, I do cordially ask you to inform me about your decision. I would like to thank you cordially for your concern, for your invitation to take part in the court proceedings, and for the job that you are doing.

I am sending my greetings due to the upcoming holidays for you personally and for your entire team, I wish you strength, endurance, and good health in your difficult work.

Once again, thank you for your concern. I.G.”<sup>106</sup>

In this case, the trauma was not articulated by complaining directly or referring to underserved harsh circumstances, but acted out: It manifests itself through the language and arguments, the indirect and nonintrusive reference to poverty and disability, the manifestation of low literacy, in the non-distinction between formal and

<sup>105</sup> LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 360, 7-8.

<sup>106</sup> LYA, f. K1, ap. 58-B, b. 198, 8.

informal communication styles, the experience of powerlessness, the reliance on emotions rather than formal arguments, the use of emotions, excessive gratitude, lack of agency, and a certain emotional indifference to her father's case, her learned helplessness and radical acceptance of whatever the decision may be, and finally the desire to be informed. She represents a subject who is pacified, for one or another reason, and has learned to accept her fate without objections.

## Conclusions

In official Soviet discourse, the representation of the Holocaust was distorted. Soviet ideology implied that ethnic conflicts were by-products of capitalism and that such conflicts had been resolved in Soviet societies. It was important to maintain the belief that that all Soviet nations suffered equally during the Second World War and that none of them was exclusive. Furthermore, it was important to maintain the idea of fraternity and solidarity amongst Soviet citizens. Nazi crimes were seen as ideologically, not ethnically motivated, while the role of local Nazi collaborators was downplayed and the Holocaust lost its uniqueness as Jewish tragedy.

As Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, the local Nazi collaborators were sentenced by the occupational authorities. Due to the Soviet ideological standpoint and the focus on ideological conflicts rather than on ethnic ones, the local Nazi collaborators were convicted mostly of anti-Soviet activities. The sentences covered 'Jews' with euphemisms like Soviet citizens or Soviet people, making the Holocaust invisible. Furthermore, the local Nazi collaborators were portrayed as nationalists and traitors to the Soviet Union. Thus, in a paradox way, the sentences produced nearly patriotic biographies.

The Soviet societies were characterised by censorship and silence. Capital punishment and death sentences were reduced to taboo subjects. The silence was reinforced by many internal and external factors, such as political requirements, social pressure, or simply shame. Death sentences were kept secret and the families were made to believe that their fathers had been deported or imprisoned without rights of correspondence. The Nazi collaborators who served their sentences and came home were discouraged from talking about their sentences and crimes.

The children of Nazi collaborators grew up knowing little or nothing about their fathers. Furthermore, as the fathers were convicted enemies of the Soviet system, the families lost not only their fathers, but also, in many cases their homes, friends, and jobs. Some went into hiding to avoid further persecution. They were often subjected to poverty and fear of political persecution. Many children grew up knowing nothing and were thus burdened not by their parents' crimes, but by poverty, displacement, uncertainty, silence, and half-lies.

In the absence of reliable information and free discussions, families developed their own narratives based on denial, partial awareness, half-lies, distortions, and so on. Many families established a pathological homeostasis based on false beliefs, such as that their fathers had been mistaken for someone else, that they were still alive somewhere in Russia, that they were moral heroes and forced to act against their will, or the families simply did not talk about the missing family member to avoid facing the truth and to maintain normalcy in everyday life.

The breaking point of this silence was the fall of the Soviet bloc and the declaration of Lithuanian independence. People who had been convicted of resistance to the occupational regime were rehabilitated. The problem was that most local Nazi col-

laborators had been framed as traitors to the Soviet Union and anti-Soviet activists, and so they were rehabilitated almost automatically in the post-Soviet turmoil. After their crimes came to light, some of them were de-rehabilitated again, and the complexity of the process of rehabilitation and de-rehabilitation left families in confusion.

To sum up, the appeal letters written by (grand)children of Nazi collaborators reveal emotional and cognitive complexities: the search for information and justice, the need to clarify uncertainties, resolve contradictions between archival documents and family histories, economic motivations and the search for compensation for troubled childhoods, radical acceptance and lack of agency, and morally, but not ideologically motivated attempts to rehabilitate fathers and to validate both the suffering of the father and of the family.

The reconciliation with and acceptance of (grand)parents' crimes was badly affected by the Soviet period for several reasons. First, (grand)children doubted their (grand) parents' crimes, they doubt, above all the legacy of the Soviet jurisdiction: From their perspective, the illegitimate system was not a capable of generating legitimate convictions. The second aspect is that the Soviet regime reinforced silence and prevented free discussions, so the (grand)children felt burdened not by their fathers' crimes, but by silence, i.e. abandonment, uncertainty, fears, secrecy, poverty, displacement, and the loss of home, by something that had happened and which was never discussed or explained.

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Quotation: Rasa Baločkaitė, (Grand)children of Nazi Collaborators in Lithuania: Dealing with the Family Past, in: S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 8 (2021) 2, 63-85.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/ART\\_RBAL01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/ART_RBAL01)

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 8 (2021) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121>

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In appreciation to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) for supporting this publication.