Ellen Cassedy with Irena Veisaitė. Unknown photographer.

REDISCOVERING A LITVAK IDENTITY THROUGH YIDDISH: INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN CASSEDY

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Interview by Laima Vincė

Laima Vincė: What doors did learning Yiddish open for you?

Ellen Cassedy: I started studying Yiddish in 1989 when my mother died, rather young. It was a way to remember her even though she didn't actually speak Yiddish.

Laima Vincė: She didn't?

Ellen Cassedy: She would sort of sprinkle a word here and there into her speech. I think she understood it. But she had not grown up in a home where Yiddish was the language because only one of her parents was an immigrant. I wanted to connect myself to her and I wanted to stay in touch with my ancestors' roots. Politically I've always been connected to unheard people, to ordinary people, unsung people. Yiddish literature brings life to the everyday experiences of ordinary people. By the time I connected to it in the 1990s, books written in Yiddish were hard to find. Yiddish led me to Lithuania.

Now I translate from Yiddish. I've published two books. One of them I'm the co-translator. I'm starting on a third book with a co-translator.

In 1990, when my mother had died, I also committed to becoming a literary writer. I went and earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College. As I went through this journey, I started writing my book. I had completed my journey when I began writing the first page of *We Are Here*, but the reader had not. I had to think: What does the reader not yet know and what will they want to figure out?

Laima Vincė: Let's talk about your book, *We Are Here*. What were your inner motivations for writing this book?

Ellen Cassedy: *We Are Here* is an account of a journey that I took into the very fraught territory of the Holocaust, into my ancestral connection to Lithuanian, my growing connection to Yiddish. I feel that the book offers an intimate perch from which to explore a wider world. When I started writing the book, I was motivated solely by wanting to connect to my family story. And then, on the brink of my trip two things disrupted that motivation. One was that my Great Uncle revealed that he had been a member of the Jewish ghetto police in Šiauliai and the other was that an old man in my ancestral town of Rokiškis asked to speak to a Jew before he died. He'd been a bystander. He'd witnessed what had happened to the Jews in his town and wanted to bear witness. This just shook up my view of what this trip was going to be about. I knew that I was going to be studying Yiddish at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University. That was sort of a grounding place to call home and a place that anchored me during my summer in Lithuania. The journey that I went through while I was there was very unexpected. I ended up making a point of connecting with Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania who were exploring the Holocaust, what happened, and were trying to figure out—what do you do with it? How does a nation move forward from a history of genocide. It became very profound for me. It changed a lot of my views of bystanders, of victims. I enlarged my understanding of how ordinary people in Lithuania had been affected by World War II, the Soviet occupation, the Soviet years, the Nazi years. My goal became to share with my readers some of the new understandings that I had come to by really penetrating beneath the surface. I went there with a Jewish background. I have a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish background and I was going there to connect with my Jewish side of my family. I think a lot of people doing that go to that landscape scanning the landscape and picking out the things that are Jewish and focusing on them. I did focus on those things, but I really worked hard to enlarge the lens and see not only the Jewish experience but the context for it and who Jews were living among and what it was really like, how Lithuanians experienced some of these same things. Of course, I connected it with my own country, the United States. I feel that our country has not really dealt with the genocide of Native Americans and racism. That was always in the back of my mind—to make those comparisons.

Laima Vincė: I read all the criticism of your book out there, both the official published reviews and the unofficial critiques on Facebook and on blogs. Some of your biggest critics were Jews, Dovid Katz, Efraim Zuroff, Grant Gochin. They were accusing you of being too lenient towards Lithuanians in this book. There are some very mean things out there that they've written about you and your book. So, what is your position on that? I got the sense that there is a group of Jewish people with Litvak heritage out there who do not agree with your book's mission.

Ellen Cassedy: I feel like you can't talk about the Holocaust without pain. So, it didn't surprise me that not everybody could go where I was going. That was completely okay. And second, I expected that the book would churn up very difficult feelings and views, and we'd have very difficult conversations. That is not a surprise to me. I feel like it's okay. As a third-generation person, whose parent was not a refugee from Hitler in any way, not a victim of the Holocaust, I was to the side, and I was distant enough that I was in a certain position in relation to these historical events that not everybody is in. I give people wide leeway to feel, no, you can't try to understand ordinary Lithuanians whose grandfather was a Nazi or whatever. They just aren't going there. I needed to go there, and I

think it's okay that not everybody is. So, I have a lot of compassion for everyone on the continuum with their views about this.

Laima Vincė: What are your thoughts about Rita Gabis's book, *A Guest at the Shooters' Banquet* and her approach to talking about collaboration?

Ellen Cassedy: I think that she's stepping into the same terrain and some of the same issues. I respect that. It takes a lot of courage for her to do that. Then there's Julija Šukys's book—same kind of thing, and then there's Silvia Foti's book. There have been reckonings by second and third generation Lithuanian Americans or Canadians. They are brave to look back and just wrestle with beloved family members who have been keeping secrets over decades. Now that these writers are growing up and starting to ask questions, they are having to come to terms with difficult, difficult issues. And I think it's all for the good.

Laima Vincė: When your book was translated into Lithuanian and published over there, what was some of the feedback that you received from Lithuanian readers?

Ellen Cassedy: I'm not sure that I ever spoke to somebody who read the book in Lithuanian.

I didn't expect, though, that people in the Lithuanian American community would reach out to me.

Laima Vincė: Tell me about that. You are an active member of A.A.B.S.

Ellen Cassedy: Yes, I am. That was a very welcoming community for me. There were many people who really reached out to me and welcomed me as one of the Baltic community. They accepted my participation with open arms and that was wonderful.

Laima Vincė: Was that your first footstep into the Lithuanian American community?

Ellen Cassedy: My first contact was Diana Vidutis.

Laima Vincė: Oh yes, she's a lovely person.

Ellen Cassedy: She lived in my town in the Washington area, and she invited me out to dinner. I knew nothing about the Lithuanian American community, and she was my guide. In many places where I went Lithuanian American women, aged 40 to 60, would come up to me and burst into tears and say, "I've been waiting for this information my whole life and thank you." I think what surprised Lithuanian Americans was somebody who they read as a Jew was open to seeing Lithuanians as human beings and not just perpetrators. My feeling is that if you

separate people into these two columns—the bad Lithuanians and the good Jews—what you're really doing is preparing the way for another Holocaust. It's not easy to not do that.

I would like to mention the Lithuanian American historian Saulius Sužiedėlis as an influence. I met him for coffee in Washington D.C early on when I was working on my book. I felt so close to him. I felt that he was this amazing bridge builder. He served as a mentor from within the Lithuanian community. He reached out to me.

I just gave a talk in Baltimore about my book to a book club. Somebody in the group said, "I so appreciate you're not being judgmental and it's not just a question of good and bad." I said, "No, it is a question of good and bad and you do have to be judgmental, but it's difficult to hold both in your mind at the same time."

Laima Vincė: Do you mean having discernment?

Ellen Cassedy: Yes, you have to be able to condemn certain actions and ideologies. That's super important. So, I'm not at all saying to throw the whole moral code out the window. That is not what it is. It's way more sophisticated to be able to open your mind to the whole range of humanity and human beings and hold onto your moral code. It's easier to say these people are bad and these people are good. I see that was how the Nazi concentration camp officials said that some people go to the right and some people go to the left.

Laima Vincė: Tell me about meeting Irena Veisaitė and how that meeting changed how you were writing this book.

Ellen Cassedy: Totally changed it. I was connected to her through Ina Nazarevskis from the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. She said, "Irena is my second mother." As I say in the book, on my first night in Vilnius we were at the Yiddish Institute's opening session, and I saw her sitting under the stars. I walked over and introduced myself. I asked her if I could interview her. She said, "No, I'm leaving on vacation. You can get this information from somewhere else." I pushed and she finally agreed, and our meeting was transformative. She just opened my eyes. I said to her, "Tell me about this Jewish project," and she said to me, "It's not a Jewish project." That sentence alone was so enlightening to me. I really feel that she was a true humanist. She had this ability—and she had this standing, this authority, being herself a victim of the Holocaust—to be able to say, "I am reaching out with my heart to Lithuania and Lithuanians and we, Jews and non-Jews, we have a obligation to explore this and repair this and move forward from this." I went back to Vilnius many times and I made a point of seeing her every time and it was just so important to me and I really feel her loss deeply.

Laima Vincė: Tell me about your meeting with Leonidas Donskis. He grew up in Soviet occupied Lithuania not knowing that he was Jewish. During the Lithuanian independence movement his father took him aside and told him everything. He found he was half Jewish and that Lithuanians helped the Germans kill Jews.

Ellen Cassedy: He was shocked. He couldn't believe it. That was interesting to me. In one day I'd meet with people who'd say to me that during the Soviet period it was impossible to find out a single thing about the Holocaust and then two hours later I'd meet another person who'd say everybody knew, it was everywhere.

I remember meeting with this one psychologist at Vilnius University who said “There was this attic in my grandparents’ home where I grew up, and I always wondered about that attic. It turned out that the house had been owned by Jews. She had been told nothing about the Holocaust, but she had this inkling that there was something going on in this house. Up in the attic there were these things, these objects, and she didn’t understand what they were. It was why she became a psychologist. There was this search, this sense of something hidden going on. So that was an example of someone who didn’t know nothing, but also didn’t know the truth, and was somewhere in between. So, Donskis didn’t know. He made it his business to know and to find out. He was very courageous about that. I felt that I was in the presence of a very important person when I was with him. Lithuania was an education for me that truth is complicated. History is complicated. You can’t just know for sure that this was good, and this was bad and this was this way and this was that way.

Laima Vincė: Do you think that as Americans we were taught simplified versions of history in school. I attended public school and I know that I was fed a simple outline of history without much depth.

Ellen Cassedy: Totally. I cut my teeth on becoming a skeptic during the Cold War. In history class we’d be told that the Soviet Union feeds its citizens propaganda, and I’d shoot my hand in the air and say, “But the United States puts out propaganda too.” I took that spirit with me to Lithuania. I would look beneath the surface and not just accept whatever line gets offered to me.

Laima Vincė: Tell me some more about Litvak American writers. Did you know of any Litvak American writers when you were preparing to write your book. How has the tradition of Litvak American writing influenced your writing?

Ellen Cassedy: First off,I encountered the word, Litvak, over and over again in Lithuania way more than I ever did in the United States. Here in the U.S. Litvak is more of an in-group word. There’s the Litvaks and the Glitzianos. It’s a joke in the Jewish community in America. Litvaks are seen as uptight pointy nosed intellectuals and Glitzianos are earthy less educated people from the southern states.

Laima Vincė: I know Litvaks of the older generation who are incredibly proud to be Litvaks and who would take offense with what you just said.

Ellen Cassedy: There are thesenicknames that get thrown back and forth and stereotypes. In the era when East Europe was the place where Eastern European Jews were—now they are all over the world—it was very, very important and it was the word they used to characterize themselves. It took becoming a Yiddish student to learn that. I never divided up Jewish American writers into the Litvaks and the non-Litvaks, ever. I barely knew my way around that whole thing.

Laima Vincė: I’m trying to understand something. This is an important theme in this book. So, you have this North American Lithuanian diaspora. Then there is the wartime, postwar generation, who in the diaspora created this rich literary world filled with literary journals and publications. Then comes the next generation who are writing in

English, but they are still writing about Lithuania. At the same time, they are entering into the mainstream American and Canadian culture because that's the culture that they live in. What I'm trying to figure out is this. So many Litvaks emigrated at the turn of the last century because of draconian Tsarist policies and laws like conscripting Jewish men into the army for life. So, you have this massive immigration of both Christians and Jews out of Lithuania in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I'm wondering if there was any literary movement at that time that would have been specifically Litvak with books about that culture and history.

Ellen Cassedy: I don't make that distinction because there were always Ukrainian Jews coming to the United States, and Polish and the Austro-Hungarian Jews. Philip Roth, didn't he come from Lithuania?

Laima Vincė: Many American Jews come from the Litvak territories, which would be Belarus, Lithuania, parts of Ukraine and Poland. The Litvak territory didn't have borders. It was this huge cultural phenomenon.So many prominent artists, writers, and humanitarians in the United States have Litvak ancestry.So, what I've been trying to figure out is if there was at any point a Litvak American literature? Or did they come to the U.S., and everyone blended together?

Ellen Cassedy: Iwas very tuned in to who were the prominent Jews in American culture, writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Grace Paley, Nadine Gordimer, Leonard Bernstein. I was aware that they were second or third generation East European Jews or sometimes German Jews. I wasn't aware of any more distinctions. In the 1920s, Jewish writers wrote in Yiddish. That was the heyday. Then they transitioned into writing in English. There were writers who were writing in English who were not going to make anything of being Jewish. It was only later, in the postwar years, that Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, started to hone in on the Jewish experience.

Laima Vincė: So, let's take out Litvak and say Jewish American literature. Who were the top writers who you read and who influenced you as a writer?

Ellen Cassedy: I read them all. I became an adult reader in the late sixties and early seventies. The sixties were the heyday of the Jewish American writers. The publishing industry was heavily Jewish. It was everywhere. It had a huge impact on us and on our culture, and on all readers in America.

Laima Vincė: Did you feel that the Jewish writers of the sixties and seventies were shaking you up as a writer or were they just out there in the atmosphere. Did they make you more aware of your Jewish heritage.

Ellen Cassedy: I felt some sort of pride in the fact that they were Jewish. I feel that during that era there was a strain in Jewish culture to run away from Jewish roots and assimilate into American culture. In the sixties some of these second-generation Jewish writers were reclaiming their roots and bringing into the mainstream how they were wrestling with their Jewish roots.

Laima Vincė: Woody Allen?

Ellen Cassedy: Woody Allen would be an example.

Laima Vincė: That had a ripple effect of so many other Americans embracing being a hyphenated American.

Ellen Cassedy: I was deep in the Jewish people of the book tradition. There was nothing more important in my family of origin than words, word usage, and books. When I was 15 my goal was to recognize every reference in *The New York Times* book review. I'd go to the library several times a week and just pour through the stacks. Do I know this writer? Should I read that one? I was a self-educated bibliophile but from deep within the Jewish tradition. I felt ensconced in that tradition and that what I was doing was part of it.

My mother's father was an immigrant. She was my real literary mentor. She was a writer. She was a children's book author. She was very literary. Her cart was in English literature. I was brought up to feel that England and Europe was where it was at, that was the true place, and that if you could be part of that culture, then you were really somewhere. She longed to write like Evelyn Waugh. Jane Austin! They were the people. My mother was part of a generation of women who went to Hunter College and became teachers. She was born in 1930. They all grew up just hankering for that European and English literary culture.

Laima Vincė: How do you feel as a Jewish American writer, as a person with relatives who have survived the Holocaust, having your work analyzed in this book side by side with the work of Lithuanian American writers? Do you feel uncomfortable?

Ellen Cassedy: You mean writers like Gabis, Šukys, Šileika, Markelis? No, not at all!

It's not like a primary identification I have to say. I don't see myself primarily as Litvak American or Jewish American. I went to a talk by Samuel Bak and his first words were, "Ich bin Vilner," which means, "I am from Vilna." That's just not true for me. This identity is one that I discovered. I am truly a representative of the third generation. I'm really pleased with the overlap in subject matter of myself and Lithuanian American writers who are exploring that period, but I don't put myself into that category really. I don't put myself in the category of Jewish American writer either. For this book, *We Are Here*, I do, but not for my book, *9 to 5*. I've gone through life with the name Ellen Cassedy, an Irish name, which is from my father's side of the family, and you know that's a particular experience rather than my being half Jewish and out there for everyone to see. It is a different experience than if my name were Ellen Levine, my mother's name.

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