

Jonas Noreika: Was Lithuania's national hero a mass murderer?

In Lithuania, Jonas Noreika is revered for his fight against Hitler's henchmen and Soviet occupiers. Now his granddaughter, of all people, has revealed that her grandfather was in fact a Nazi stooge.

By Solveig Grothe
17.09.2021, 1.00 p.m.



Journalist Foti with a portrait of her grandfather: "The feeling of falling through a trapdoor."

Photo: Jose M.Osorio ZUMA PRESS

Silvia Foti had promised her mother on her deathbed: She would research what her grandfather had done, and she would write it down.

For years the mother had collected material, then she had fallen ill and could no longer tell the story of Jonas Noreika from Lithuania's famous fighter against the Nazis and the Soviet occupiers.

Silvia Foti's mother died in 2000, and she herself fulfilled her mother's wish, even if it took her 20 years to do so. In March her book was published. However, it is not about Noreika, the hero, but about Noreika, the alleged criminal and mass murderer. When she learned what he had done, Foti says, "I went into a state of shock. I had the feeling of falling through a trapdoor."

The story of the national hero Jonas Noreika is not only a family drama, it also reveals a sore spot in the past of Lithuania. Now, a debate has erupted in the Baltic country that many have long avoided: about the role of Lithuanians during the Holocaust. And political opponents are now also using the case to attack the country from the outside.

In Lithuania, "people like Jonas Noreika and others who took part in the Holocaust are being proclaimed heroes," said Vadim Gigin in a talk show of the largest state newspaper. He is dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Belarusian University and one of the leading propagandists of the Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenko.

The regime of the latter has the Nato country as a favorite enemy. If Lithuania does not want to acknowledge its mass extermination of Jews, Gigin said, "it means that we are dealing with neo-Nazism and revanchism.

Freedom fighters or mass murderers?

Until now, such statements have been dismissed in Lithuania as Russian propaganda. But the louder the discussion about the involvement of Lithuanian citizens in the Holocaust, the more difficult this is. And Silvia Foti is now fueling this debate.



Jonas Noreika, also known under his nom de guerre "General Storm"
Photo: private

Foti, 60, grew up with Lithuanian language and culture in Chicago, in the largest Lithuanian community outside the homeland. At home, she heard stories about Jonas Noreika, how he fought the Nazis and the Soviets.

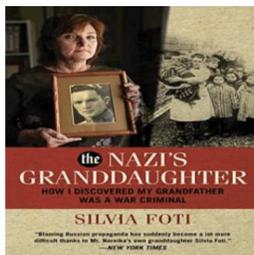
Foti was raised to honor her grandfather and her homeland. In Lithuania, streets are named after Noreika.

For two decades, she wrestled with her mother's dark legacy. Foti was initially convinced that her grandfather was a hero and everything else was just malicious lies. She could not imagine that he could be a murderer. Until she started researching.

Jonas Noreika was born in 1910 in the village of Šukioniai, deep in rural northern of Lithuania. He aspired a military career as a young man, studied law and wrote articles and short stories, mainly about the struggle for freedom against the Russians. It was not until 1918 that Lithuania became a sovereign republic. In 1938, Noreika was assigned to the military court of the Lithuanian army. But already in 1940 it was over with the state independence the Soviet Union annexed the country.

A dark legacy

Like Noreika, many soldiers went underground to plan the liberation. They counted on the expected invasion of the Wehrmacht and took advantage of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union for an insurgency. Noreika also fought in the so-called June Uprising against the Soviets for Lithuania's independence. The Red Army fled, but for the Lithuanians this did not bring autonomy, but German occupation.



[Foti, Silvia]

The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I Discovered My Grandfather was a War Criminal

Publisher: Regnery History Page Count: 400 Language: English

Buy for €23,43

In 1943, the Nazis imprisoned him in the Stutthof concentration camp near Gdansk. After Noreika remained in Lithuania, which was once again under communist occupation, and organized the underground resistance against the Soviets. He was arrested by the

Soviet secret police and was imprisoned in the KGB, tried and executed in 1947.

But this was only a part of Jonas Noreika's life.

During her travels to Lithuania, Foti was increasingly irritated by statements in which her grandfather as a "murderer of Jews". She came across articles by the Lithuanian journalist Evaldas Balčiūnas, who had long expressed doubts about the official Noreika's official biography. Thus, in 2012, Balčiūnas wrote: "While perusal it is difficult to say whether it consists more of omissions or of untruths." Noreika's involvement in the mass murder of civilians, he said, was a secret neither to Lithuanians nor to the world.

"I gave the order to shoot every Jew".

Balčiūnas referred, among other things, to a SPIEGEL article from 1984 with the title "The murderers will still needed" In it, the author Leonid Olschwang had written about inmates of the Stutthof concentration camp: "Most of the Lithuanians in Stutthof were former officers, including ... that Captain Jonas Noreika, who had ordered and carried out the murder of the Jewish population of the town of Plungė."



Jewish Nazi victims in occupied Lithuania.

Photo: George Kadish

AP

Olschwang was a Jew and himself from Plungė in the west of the country. He described in SPIEGEL how Lithuanians killed 70 Jewish citizens in the city, even before German soldiers arrived in June 1941. The Germans soon moved on, he said. "There remained the Lithuanians,

who without the Germans had ordered this under the leadership of their own officers murdered the entire Jewish population of the city.

Silvia kept researching, more and more obsessively. She discovered the memoirs of the Lithuanian author Aleksandras Pakalniškis, who reported that in 1941 he had worked in Noreika's office in Plungė. In his 1995 published memoirs Pakalniškis wrote that during the summer all the Jews were locked up in synagogues. In Plungė at that time there were only "two sickly German soldiers." "Somewhat trembling" one of them asked: "What are you going to do with the Jews who are locked up in the synagogue?" Noreika's reply: "I have already given the order to shoot every one." The massacre took place in the night of 12 to 13 July, 1941.

Foti calls her grandfather "Desk Killer."

In August the Germans made Noreika the head of the Šiauliai district administration, responsible for the establishment of the ghetto in the town of Žagarė. He was also responsible for the transfer of Jews to the ghetto, from where they were sent to nearby killing pits. Noreika's justice covered a large district in the north of the country, with Šiauliai as the fourth largest city in Lithuania. Documents concerning the transfer of Jews and the confiscation of their property bear his signature. Meanwhile Foti calls her grandfather a "desk killer."

After the battle of Stalingrad Noreika is said to have joined the anti-German resistance. Like other Lithuanians, he refused to join the SS and mobilize others to do so. On March 17, 1943 he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. His wife and four-year-old daughter never saw him again. Both fled to Germany in July 1944, lived in Switzerland and Argentina until they received a visa for the USA.



Family photo: The photo from 1936 shows Jonas Noreika with his mother Anelija and his sisters Antanina (left) and Ona

Foto: JoseM.Osorio / ZUMAPRESS / IMAGO

In January 1945 Noreika was released from the concentration camp and soon after was drafted by the Red Army. In the winter he received a position as a legal advisor at the Academy of Sciences and was secretly involved in the arrest of the anti-Soviet resistance until his arrest.

After Lithuania's independence in 1990, Foti's mother got hold of some 3000 pages of KGB transcripts about her father, a real treasure for the journalist Silvia Foti. Her mother also kept letters, photos and hundreds of newspaper clippings sent by former companions of Noreika, to whom she promised to write a book about their leader.

In the course of her research, Foti also met American Grant Gochin, a descendant of Lithuanian Jews. Gochin had lost several dozen relatives in the Holocaust. His relatives lived in the region under Noreika's command. Meanwhile, Gochin and Foti are convinced that Jonas Noreika was responsible for the orders and therefore shares responsibility for the murders. Gochin filed several lawsuits in Lithuania to stop Noreika from being honored as a hero, so far without success.

Critics accused of defiling their own nests

The journalist Evaldas Balčiūnas has also been on trial several times because he was was sued. He first heard of Noreika when a newspaper colleague made the remarkable statement in 1993: "In the archives, a new censorship has surfaced: The attorney general's office has agreed that documents in cases of mass murders not be released to all possible researchers will be disclosed. (...) An archivist quietly explained to me, why: for the sake of blessed peace and quiet. They want to hide these cases not so much from Lithuanians as from Jews." More than 90 percent of the more than 200,000 Lithuanian Jews were killed in the Nazi era, one of the highest percentages in any country.

That Balčiūnas criticized the glorification of Lithuanian personalities and called them Holocaust collaborators, earned him some complaints. However, the issue only gained greater attention in 2015, when a group of Lithuanian celebrities demanded that the plaque commemorating Jonas Noreika be removed from the library building of the Academy of Sciences in Vilnius.



Protesters destroyed the memorial plaque for Noreika at the Academy of Sciences. In September, this new one was installed, to honor the "memorable resistance fighter." Private photo.

This was protested by the Research Center for Genocide and Resistance in Lithuania. The state institution declared in an official memorandum that Noreika was innocent and that "the contempt for Lithuanian patriots (...) was organized by neighbors from the East", i.e. that the initiative was Moscow-controlled.

In 2016, the Lithuanian writer Rūta Vanagaitė had a similar experience after the publication of her book "Our People", a personal examination of Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust. Insulted as a Race traitor and KGB agent, she left her country.

One of the initiators of the campaign against the plaque was Grant Gochin. He filed several lawsuits against the state research center, claiming that it's the responsibility of Lithuanians for the Holocaust, and demanded a review and retraction of the information about Noreika. The center rejected the complaints, saying that the Holocaust in Lithuania was a consequence of the activities of the Nazi occupying power, which took advantage of the Lithuanian structures. Accordingly, Lithuanians acted exclusively on German orders and were forced to do so.

State researchers even declared Noreika a rescuer of Jews

In a 2018 statement, the center also questioned the competence of the archival documents that Gochin had commissioned researchers to examine, including Balčiūnas, as they did not have a degree in history. It also threatened Gochin that he might be guilty of defamation. Gochin's claims were dismissed. The civil courts did not consider themselves having jurisdiction, and the prosecutor's office declined to investigate the research center.

In December 2019, however, the center surprised with another memorandum: citing new documents, it now declared Noreika not only innocent but even as a savior of the Jews. Leading Lithuanian historians strongly rejected this allegedly new finding. Adas Jakubauskas, head of the research center, however, stuck to the center had "reliable data" proving that the Jews had been saved. "Noreika is actively promoting the anti Nazi resistance and the rescue of Jews organized".

In April 2021 Jakubauskas was dismissed after a secret vote in the Lithuanian parliament. Co-workers had accused him of polishing historical research, including the claim that ghettos were relatively safe for Jews. The parliament found that Jakubauskas was damaging the center's public image.

"Raise your head, Lithuanian".

The new director was the head of the Research Department, Arūnas Bubnys. The Jewish American weekly newspaper "The Algemeiner" does not expect a change of direction. On its homepage it calls Bubnys a "Holocaust Revisionist."

Grant Gochin recently appealed to the European Court of Human Rights. He accuses Lithuania of Holocaust denial and the systematic distortion of Noreika's role in the murder of Lithuanian Jews, which, given his family background, violates his rights.



Jonas Noreika and his future wife Antanina on their first date.
(October 1932)

Private photo.

Journalist Silvia Foti also does not believe that her grandfather acted solely on German instructions. Among documents that her mother had collected, she found a 32 page brochure by Noreika, the title of which translates roughly as: "Raise your head, Lithuanian". In it were sentences such as: "In the land of Klaipėda, the Lithuanians are being overthrown by the Germans, and in Great Lithuania the Jews are buying up all the farms at auction. What will we do when all the capital and land is in the hands of Jews?!... Once and for all: we will not buy from Jews!" Foti sees the pamphlet as Lithuania's equivalent of Hitler's "Mein Kampf" suitable

for inciting hatred of Jews. Noreika had already written it 1933, as a young soldier in the Lithuanian army.

"I was called an agent of Putin".

Today Foti calls her grandfather a Nazi collaborator. She assumes that he was involved in the murder of at least 8000 Jews. A murder committed by his own hand could not be proven.

"He collaborated with the Nazis, acted like them, was paid by them, hated Jews like them and enabled torture and murder like them," she wrote in the "New York Times". Correcting historical memory" has proven to be dangerous. Because she publicly questioned the official life story of her grandfather in public, she was vilified in the Lithuanian community in Chicago and Lithuania. "I was called an agent of Russian President Vladimir Putin."

Foti supports Gochin's complaint to the European Court of Justice. Whether and when the complaint will be allowed is uncertain. "I think that we still have a long road ahead," Foti says. But she says she would like to see Lithuania take joint responsibility for what happened during the Holocaust and not just blame the German Nazis.

True, without the Germans, the Holocaust would not have begun. "But it would not have been so devastating," Foti says, "if it had not been for the Lithuanians themselves who so much enthusiasm in the in the murder of their fellow citizens."