

Dear Leonard Cohen,

*Dance Me to the End of Love*, you once explained, "is a love song inspired by the Holocaust." The Nazis often forced string quartets to perform as they sent prisoners to their death. "Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin," you said, is about "the beauty there... at the end of existence."

I began this letter before you died. It is about your ancestral home, Vilnius, or Vilna as the Jews called it, where your family was close to coming to the end of existence. My husband Abbey and I were invited by the human rights festival, *Inconvenient Films*, to show our documentary *Dark Lullabies*, about the effects of the Holocaust on the next generation of Germans and Jews. You had been so warm in your response to the film, I wanted to return your generosity by telling you about the extraordinary event that happened in Vilnius.

I was reluctant to accept the invitation. As you know, Vilnius was part of Poland before World War II. It was called "Jerusalem of the North," because of its vibrant cultural and intellectual Jewish life. But then the Germans and their collaborators created the Vilna Ghetto.

It was there that my parents were imprisoned after fleeing Warsaw. It was there my mother audaciously removed her yellow star, risking death, to leave the ghetto and bring back a doctor to set my father's broken leg. It was there my father's twin sister Eda, her husband and their sweet little seven-year-old Misia were *selected* for death. My father never forgave himself for not being able to save them."

I read all about it in my father's memoir, *The Aftermath: a Survivor's Odyssey through War-torn Europe*. Why would I want to go to that monstrous place?

Yet, the trip to Vilnius was also a pilgrimage to my parents' past. Abbey and I had been invited to the heart of darkness in Germany, and had travelled there several times. Each time we felt we had contributed to opening the hearts and minds of the next generations of Germans about the legacy they, like we, had inherited.

But Lithuania is different from Germany. Today it has a population of just over three million, mostly Roman Catholics and a tiny remnant of the Jewish community. Every year on Lithuania's Independence Day, the neo-Nazi march in Vilnius from the Cathedral up the city's central boulevard.

Like the other former Soviet bloc countries, Lithuanians placed all the blame for the Holocaust on the West and the Soviet Union. Although Lithuanians collaborated in killing over ninety per cent of their own Jewish population, they never acknowledged any responsibility. For seventy-five years and three generation they said nothing, learned nothing, and changed not at all.

Then, last August, the Jewish community organized a march to commemorate the massacre in Moletai, just outside of Vilnius. There, in the summer of 1941, the

Lithuanian police rounded up all the Jews of the village, locked them in a synagogue without food or water, then forced them to march to their death. They shot over three thousand four hundred Jews into a pit – an atrocity followed by seventy-five years of silence.

The Jewish community organized the march to mark the anniversary. They expected 200, maybe 300, people including the victim's relatives from other countries. But then, something unprecedented occurred. It began with an article the beloved Lithuanian writer and film director Marius Ivaškevičius wrote about the event.

I'm not Jewish, I'm Lithuanian ....I don't know, perhaps I am naïve, but for some reason I believe our generation can end this nightmare.... That time in Molėtai. Four o'clock. August 29. We will go visit those who have been waiting for us three-quarters of a century. I believe that as they were doing, they nonetheless knew the day would come when Lithuania would turn back to them. And then they would return to her. Because Lithuania was their home. Their only home, they had no other.

Three thousand Lithuanians came out to march with the Jewish community. They came to recognize those murdered as their own – their own loss, their own pain.

There were many young Lithuanians, priests, monks, and high-ranking officials including the President, ambassadors, ministers, the Army Chief, and the 83-year old first president of post-Soviet Lithuania. There were people from Poland, Russia, Latvia, and Belarus, who came to march with the loved ones of the massacred Jews.

Some non-Jews wore a yellow Star of David. Afterwards, everyone waited patiently to light a candle and place a stone on the memorial.

It took three generations for Lithuanians to begin to come to terms with their legacy of the Holocaust. There were two emotional screenings of *Dark Lullabies* in Vilnius and the festival organizers added a third. The audiences were almost all young people, who felt they could not move forward without facing their past. After one screening, a beautiful girl in her mid-twenties stood up and said, "We always thought this happened to the Jews. Now we realize that this happened to our own citizens, to us."

So their process of questioning and healing begins.

The list of people who trace their ancestry to this small town, those whom the Nazis and Lithuanians wanted to annihilate, includes many ordinary folk, and many of the greatest Jewish minds of our times.

It includes Nobel Prize Laureate Bob Dylan. When Dylan's award was announced, you said it was like pinning a medal on Mount Everest.

It includes our own great international human rights lawyer and former Canadian Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Irwin Cotler.

It includes comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, painter Marc Chagall, composer Aaron Copland, Beatles Manager Brian Epstein, film actor Harrison Ford, composer Philip Glass, anarchist Emma Goldman, Nobel Prize Laureate Nadine Gordimer, Oscar-winning director Michel Hazanavicius, actress Scarlett Johansson, actor Walter Matthau, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, singer-songwriter Pink, Israeli writer Amos Oz, American writer J. D. Salinger and comedian John Stewart.

And you, the great Canadian poet-novelist-singer-songwriter-gentleman.

How many other great and future leaders, thinkers, artists, parents, teachers and children did they kill?

Your passing was wrenching for Montrealers and for people around the world, who have all been so profoundly touched by your music and words. You knew yourself and you knew us like no one else ever has.

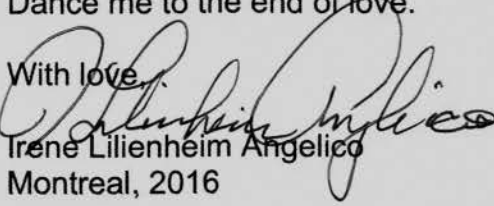
We held vigil in front of your home. We sang your songs, which we all knew, and we washed the Parc du Portugal with our tears.

In his commentary, Ivaškevičius wrote about your song, and about the stunning loss of talent and intellect that was and almost was destroyed.

Leonard Cohen is also from here. You must surely have heard his love ballad, "Dance Me to the End of Love," and perhaps you have even danced to this song. If not, give it a listen. It turns out it's about our Jews ... in detention waiting to be brought out and shot:

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin  
Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in  
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove  
Dance me to the end of love.

With love,

  
Irene Lilienheim Angelico  
Montreal, 2016