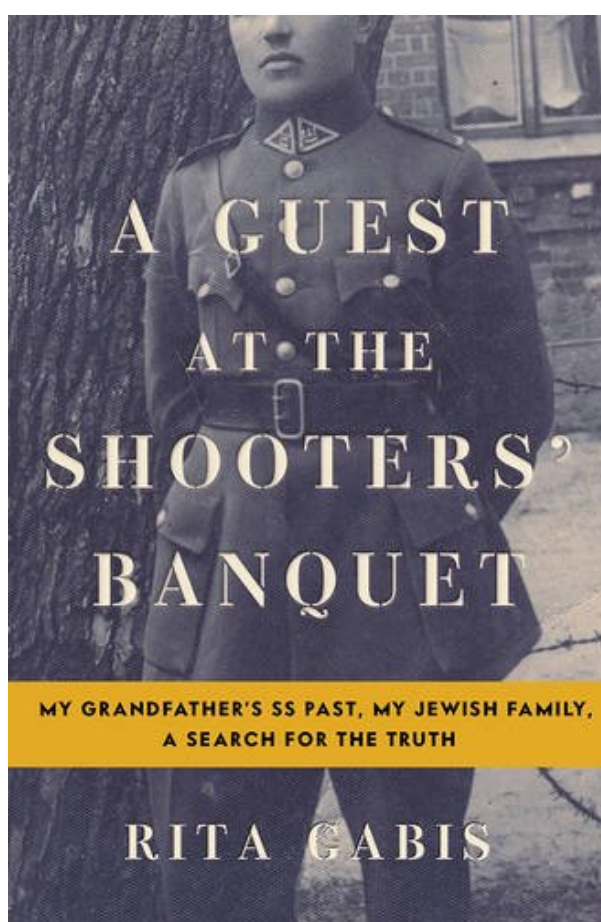
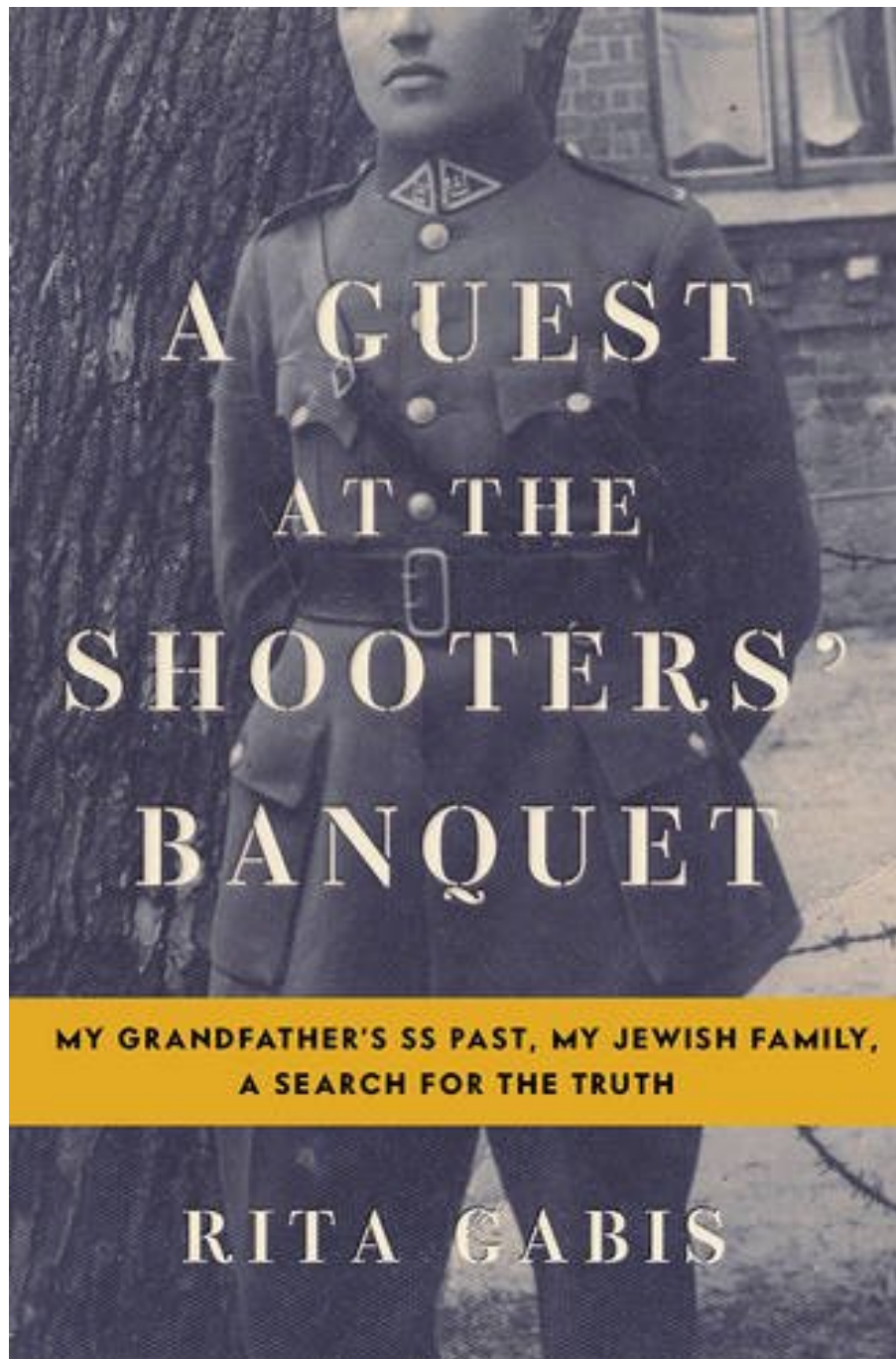


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FAMILY, A SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH BY
RITA GABIS**



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Rita Gabis comes from a family of Eastern European Jews and Lithuanian Catholics. She was close to her Catholic grandfather as a child and knew one version of his past: prior to immigration he had fought the Russians, whose brutal occupation of Lithuania destroyed thousands of lives before Hitler's army swept in.

Five years ago, Gabis discovered an unthinkable dimension to her family story: from 1941 to 1943, her grandfather had been the chief of security police under the Gestapo in the Lithuanian town of Svencionys, near the killing field of Poligon, where eight thousand Jews were murdered over three days in the fall of 1941. In 1942, the local Polish population was also hunted down. Gabis felt compelled to find out the complicated truth of who her grandfather was and what he had done.

Built around dramatic interviews in four countries, filled with original scholarship, and mesmerizing in its lyricism, *A Guest at the Shooters' Banquet* is a history and family memoir like no other, documenting "the holocaust by bullets" with a remarkable quest as Gabis returns again and again to the country of her grandfather's birth to learn all she can about the man she thought she knew.

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A Long Journey

By John D. Cofield

Rita Gabis grew up with the knowledge that her family's heritage was both mixed and mysterious. Her father's family was Lithuanian Jewish, while her mother was of Lithuanian Catholic descent. As a young girl born in the 1950s who spent her childhood in the American Midwest she was always conscious that her maternal and paternal relatives were not at ease with each other, and that distant events in a far away land had an ongoing influence on her and her family. Eventually Gabis learned that her maternal grandfather,

whom she called Senelis and knew as a kindly old man, had possibly done something terrible many years before she was born. Whether there were any truth to the rumors and what, exactly, he had done or not done, became an obsession with Gabis, and she spent years tracking down the truth: Senelis had worked with the SS during the German occupation of Lithuania, Poland, and the Soviet Union during World War II, and therefore may well have had a hand in the torture and execution of thousands of Jews and Poles.

Gabis' description of her long search for the truth about her grandfather is a compelling read. It involves not only her research on Senelis' activities but also the sometimes painful process of reestablishing contact with some estranged family members and asking them to revive buried memories. It also involves lengthy journeys to Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Russia to visit archives and libraries where she has to work around bureaucracies and deal with official indifference, poorly maintained records, and sometimes open hostility to her mission. Inevitably it also involves a lot of self-discovery, as Gabis is forced to confront her own memories, deal with old traumas, and persevere through her own physical ailments and those of her husband and other family members. In the end Gabis finds answers to some of her questions, but she and her readers are still left in some doubt as to the full extent of her grandfather's actions.

This is a fascinating book which sheds light on some very complex history, detailing Lithuania's long twentieth century journey as it lurched from being part of Tsarist Russia to a brief period of independence between the wars, then being invaded first by the Soviets and then by the Germans during World War II, and eventually becoming an unwilling part of the Soviet Union until regaining independence in 1991. It is unflinching in its descriptions of the barbaric cruelties meted out to Lithuania's Jewish population by the Nazis and their collaborators, and it is just as honest in covering the Stalinist terrors of the immediate post-World War II era. Senelis' wife and Gabis' grandmother was one of those caught up in the Soviet purges, and she spent a decade in the gulag. Her story is also included here, and while it makes for difficult reading at times it is still essential to remember it.

Witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust are growing fewer and fewer in number, and that makes it essential that books like Gabis' which gather details from victims whose voices are soon to be stilled forever continue to be written, especially since some now go so far as to deny that those terrible events happened at all. *A Guest At The Shooters' Banquet* was a difficult book for Rita Gabis to write, and it is not always an easy book to read, but that's why it's so important to do so.

17 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

A stunning book...

By Jill Meyer

I've often wondered what happened to the men who perpetrated mass murders during WW2. I'm not talking about the Hitlers, the Eichmanns, or the Hans Franks. I'm referring to the men with the guns who murdered Jews and other undesirables in the killing pits of Eastern Europe. And the men who dropped the Zyklon B tablets in the gas chambers, and those who drove the sealed gas trucks, killing the people inside. These men who did the actual hands-on killing. It takes a certain mentality and amorality to kill others, and as many historians have pointed out, a lot of alcohol releases the inhibitions. How did these men function when they returned to civilian life? So many were never caught or prosecuted after the war; they slipped through the cracks of justice and went unpunished for their deeds.

American author Rita Gabis explores this subject - personal to her - in her ambitious book, *"A Guest at the Shooters Banquet: My Grandfather's SS Past, My Jewish Family, A Search for the Truth"*. The "Shooters' Banquet" referred to in the title was an actual dinner with music and alcohol served in celebration of the murder of the thousands of Jews of a small Lithuanian town in the killing pits of Poligon. The murderers were local Lithuanian Catholics who ate and drank in honor of their great deeds. (They also shot to death two

local musicians who were performing for them because they spoke Polish!)

This topic is personal for Rita Gabis because her maternal grandfather was a police chief in the Lithuanian city of Svencionys. He fled with his family after WW2 and ended up in the United States, where he lived until his death. Rita's mother married a Jewish man; I can't imagine her family approved. As Rita grew up, nothing was said in the family about her grandfather's duties in Svencionys. It was not a topic anyone felt comfortable bringing up. The grandfather was known as a loving family man, and Rita's mother and aunts loved him. But Rita began to wonder what her grandfather did in the war and whether he participated in the killings at Poligon and other murders during his tenure under the Nazis in their occupation of Lithuania. About 15 years ago she started to look into his life and traveled to Lithuania and Israel and Poland in search of answers. Answers she might not want to learn.

Rita Gabis's book is a look at both the Catholic and Jewish life during WW2. Lithuania had had an uneasy past as the two religious groups coexisted in the same villages and cities. In addition to tracing her mother's family, she also follows three Lithuanian Jews who had survived the war. Their stories of the casual cruelties and killings they were subjected to in both the ghettos and the camps were, of course, horrifying. Their own random choices - like jumping off a train going to another ghetto - often saved their lives.

You'll have to read Gabis's book to see if she found the answers to her questions about her family and their past in Lithuania. It's an ambitious work, but extremely well-written. It doesn't quite answer my original question about whether these killers carry their deeds into the rest of their lives, but it gives a hint.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Mesmerizing and Infuriating

By bookworm

The author of the book is a poet, so that may be the reason why the narrative is so disjointed and hard to follow. She is relying on the reader to fill in the gaps and make the right associations. While I might be willing to do that for a poem, I was kind of infuriated by it while trying to read what was supposed to be a non-fiction memoir by a woman driven to find out what role her grandfather had played in the World War II slaughter of the Jews in Lithuania. In the end, I still wasn't sure, given the author's allusive style, what role he played although clearly he was on the wrong side.

I was also somewhat bored by the author's associations with the people she interviewed and her descriptions of the effect her efforts had on her psyche.

So if you are asking yourself, why in the world did I give it four stars then, let me tell you: It's the voices of the people Gabis tracked down and interviewed, the people who were in Lithuania during World War II or who are there now. The voices are wonderful-- shrewd, funny, sorrowful, and, often, extremely painful to hear but worth every moment you give them. In collecting the memories of the survivors especially, Gabis, who had serious health problems during the book's writing, has done both readers and history a great service.

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