The Baltics: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

Soviet era monument at the infamous Fort Nine near Kaunas, Lithuania, where thousands of Jews and non-Jews had been shot

A woman is receiving meals on wheels in Vilnius n 2000.

I spent the least time of all in the three Baltic states, and I documented the communities there for TIME and JDC in 1998 and 1999 when most of these pictures were taken. Since Centropa continues to work in Lithuania, I was still visiting the country in the mid to late 2000s, which is how I came upon young Artur Balterovic, who I now have a beer with whenever we are both in town.

The three Baltic states have always had a difficult history. For the most part, they had been part of the Russian Empire, save for Lithuania, which had once been part of a grand duchy with Poland between 1569 and 1795, and the Latvian city of Riga, which, had long been one of the Hanseatic ports and still looks very much like Gdansk, Hamburg and Lübeck, with its severe red brick buildings and towering Lutheran churches.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire during the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles granted the three Baltics independence, which they held for a scant two decades. In 1940 the Soviet Union swept through the region and after only one year the Germans invaded in June 1941. The Soviets then returned in 1944 and their troops remained until a highly weakened and soon-to-collapse Soviet Union began to allow them to slip away in 1990, and they came fully into independence in 1991.

When the Germans swept through the region in June 1941, every Jew who didn't manage to flee to the east was marked for death. Eyewitnesses have told us that the day the Germans arrived, more than a few local citizens began attacking their Jewish neigbhors; they didn't wait for the Germans to start murdering. The majority of Jews were herded into ghettos, where a great many starved to death, and the Germans and their local helpers murdered tens upon tens of thousands—almost all by shooting them in massive pits outside the larger cities.

The three communities are but shadows of their former selves but as everywhere else in Central Europe, I found them working as hard as they possibly could to imbue their young with a sense of Judaism while caring for their elderly and providing programming for adults.

Nina Erdelstein, then 90-years-old, is singing in the Yiddish choir of Riga in Latvia in 1999.

Two photographs taken in the Jewish school in Tallinn. The community may number barely more than a thousand members but it maintains the school, old age club, meals on wheels, a women's club, a kindergarten and a Jewish museum.