

# The Prize at the Seventh Fort

By Jeremy Schaap and Willie Weinbaum, ESPN.com

Kaunas, Lithuania — The United States is the birthplace of basketball. James Naismith, a Canadian, invented the sport. Germany, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Zaire, China, Croatia and Serbia have all produced NBA all-stars. But there is only one nation in the world where basketball is the national pastime — Lithuania, the Baltic nation that achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Fewer than four million people live in Lithuania, but only the U.S. has a richer tradition in the sport. Lithuania is the reigning European League champion, a title it first won in 1937. In both 1972 and '88, the only times U.S. teams lost in the Olympics, Lithuanians were key contributors on the Soviet teams that defeated the Americans.

Kaunas, also known as Kovno, is the country's second-largest city and, quite possibly, the most basketball-obsessed place on the planet. Arvydas Sabonis, Sarunas Marciulionis and Zydrunas Ilgauskas — the most prominent Lithuanians who've played in the NBA in the last decade — all grew up there. The city is also home to one of Europe's top club teams and a basketball academy, founded by Sabonis, that is churning out the next generation of stars. And it was in Kaunas, just before the World War II, that basketball took hold as the national pastime.

Valdas Adamkus was born in Kaunas in 1926 and grew up playing basketball. Like thousands of Lithuanians, he emigrated to the U.S. after the war. But after it regained independence, he returned to Lithuania and served as its president from 1998 to 2003. He marvels at his countrymen's passion for the game.

"Basketball is the second religion in Lithuania," Adamkus says. "The first is Roman Catholic. The second is basketball."

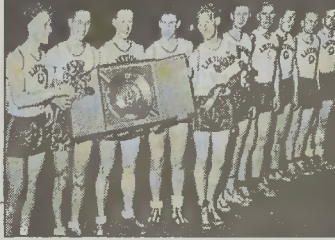
In 1939, Lithuania won its second consecutive European championship at a brand-new arena in Kaunas. Vytautas Norkus is one of two living members of that team. Born in Kaunas in 1921, he is now 83 and has lived in Connecticut since 1949.

"After we won the championships, we got three hundred lita, that's about 20, 30 dollars each," Norkus says. "And the president of Lithuania gave us wrist watches."

"They are like Michael Jordan and other NBA basketball players for American youth and American people," Adamkus says. "You don't have to be just the younger generation. I believe those are still the heroes in Lithuanian people's eyes." The 1939 team featured several Americans of Lithuanian descent, including the team's star, center Pranas Lubinas. Three years earlier, as Frank Lubin, he'd captained the U.S. team that won the first Olympic basketball gold medal in the Berlin Games.

But even as Lithuania was celebrating another European title, the continent was on the brink of war. On September 1, 1939, Germany

invaded Poland, Lithuania's neighbor to the south. Nine months later, Lithuania was swallowed up by the Soviet Union. The Soviets carried out a brutal purge, exiling and murdering thousands.



Lithuania was a basketball powerhouse, capturing the European Championships titles in 1937 and '39.

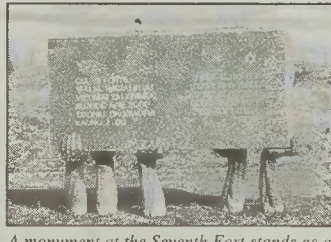
"We were afraid," Norkus says. "The deportations, and Siberia, and your friends and family were taken out. It was no freedom, no freedom."

The Soviet occupation, however, was brief. On June 22, 1941, forces of the Third Reich attacked the Soviet Union across a thousand-mile front. Within days, Germany had penetrated hundreds of miles into the Soviet Union. In Lithuania, which fell in just a few days, the German conquerors were welcomed as saviors.

"They greeted them as liberators from the Russian occupation and from being eliminated, destroyed," says Adamkus, who at the time was a teenager.

But for Lithuania's 220,000 Jews, the German invasion spelled doom. Four years later, fewer than 10,000 of them would still be alive.

Even before the Germans entered Kaunas, in fact as soon as the Soviets beat their hasty retreat, the local citizenry began torturing,



A monument at the Seventh Fort stands as a reminder of the thousands of Jews who were murdered there during the Holocaust.

raping and killing their Jewish neighbors. After the Germans seized the city, thousands of Jews were rounded up and brought to the Seventh Fort, a citadel on Kaunas's outskirts.

Karl Jager, an SS officer, was the commander of Einsatzkommando 3, the German unit that systematically carried out the extermination of the Jews of Kaunas. In an official report dated December 1, 1941, he wrote:

"On my instructions and orders, the following executions were conducted by Lithuanian partisans:

"On July 4, 1941, 463 Jews were killed at the Seventh Fort.

"On July 6, 1941, 2,514 Jews were killed at the Seventh Fort."

"Thousands of Jews were killed, hundreds every day," says Arie Segalson, a Holocaust survivor who was in Kaunas in 1941.

"Murdered, not killed, but murdered by Lithuanians. And I emphasize, by the Lithuanians."

But even as the city's Jews were butchered, basketball continued in Kaunas. In mid-July, there was a newspaper report of a game between teams of Lithuanian "partisan detachments," featuring prominent players, including some members of the 1939 European championship team.

A well-known Jewish soccer player, Nacham Blatt, was one of the few prisoners to escape the Seventh Fort. He was killed just a few weeks later, but not before, Arie Segalson says, Blatt told Segalson what he had witnessed in the Fort.

"He told us this story about 30 Jews who were killed by the Lithuanian team," says Segalson, now a retired judge in Israel. "I remember it like my personal name. He told and I heard it from him, that the players were from the basketball team named Perkunas."

Perkunas was a top club team, active during World War II. Segalson says Blatt also told him that Perkunas had played an exhibition game against a team of Germans just before the July 6 massacre at the fort, and that, for winning the game, the Lithuanians were given a grisly prize.

"For good play against the German team, they rewarded them to kill 30 Jews," Segalson says.

That story is echoed in a 1948 book, published only in Yiddish, by Holocaust survivor Josef Gar, titled "The Destruction of Jewish Kaunas," which includes this passage:

"A basketball game took place in Kaunas between a German military team and a Lithuanian team. Since the Lithuanians excelled in this sport and they emerged the victors of the match, as a prize, each member of the Lithuanian team was given the right to shoot tens of the Jews."

Also in 1948, in a journal that included survivor testimony, Isaac Nemenshik, who escaped the Seventh Fort, wrote about the alleged participation of basketball players in the massacre there:

"The Lithuanian basketball team, renowned throughout the Baltics, came into the fort. They were armed with rifles

and in the darkness of the night, we noticed that they took 30 men to the hill. After a while, we heard the familiar sound of muffled rifle fire and then they left the fort singing."

There is also, stored in Lithuania's KGB archives, the records of a 1945 trial of two Lithuanian basketball players accused of collaborating with the Germans. One of them, Vytautas Lescinskas, was a member of the Perkunas club team. According to the KGB files, four people testified during the trial that they had heard that prominent basketball players participated in the murders at the Seventh Fort.

"They were armed and they joined in on murdering the Jews," says Alex Faitelson, a Holocaust survivor from Kaunas.

Faitelson, now living in Israel,

has spent years researching the slaughter of Lithuania's Jews. He contends that a game between Germans and Lithuanians did take place, on July 6, 1941. That was the day, according to Jager's report, that more than 2,500 Jews were killed at the Seventh Fort.

"This was the subject I began to research and at first I didn't have much material," Faitelson says. "What I found were bits and pieces about the murder of the Jews by the athletes at the Seventh Fort."

Faitelson presented his findings to Efraim Zuroff, known to some as the "Last Nazi Hunter." The director of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Zuroff investigates crimes of the Holocaust and urges governments to prosecute perpetrators. Faitelson supplied evidence to Zuroff that two men who might have taken part in the reported game and the purported massacre were living in the United States.

On March 10, Zuroff formally requested that Rimvydas Valentukevicius, Lithuania's special prosecutor for Nazi-era crimes, investigate the two men — Algirdas and Vytautas Norkus.

"We have some materials from our institutions and from Dr. Zuroff, but not enough to make a decision yet" on whether to launch an investigation, special prosecutor Valentukevicius said. "This can't be speculative and the only information we have is from survivors who have died. (We are trying) to figure out how this can be proved by objective means. We must prove that the basketball match is a fact."

The Norkus brothers — twins who were 20 years old at the time of the German invasion — were prominent basketball players from Kaunas. Vytautas played for Lithuania's 1939 European championship team and both he and Algirdas were playing basketball in Kaunas in July of 1941, according to the newspaper report of a mid-July game between teams of so-called partisan detachments.

Since 1949, both Norkus brothers, now 83, have been living in Connecticut. Vytautas Norkus says that he did play one game against a German team. "I think it was police, police officers, you know." He added that the game was in the sports hall in Kaunas.

"It was a regular game, nothing to brag about," Norkus says. "Easy game."



Algirdas Norkus denies that there was any involvement by Perkunas' players in the murders at the Seventh Fort.

According to a Lithuanian encyclopedia, Vytautas Norkus played for the Perkunas club team in 1941. Perkunas is the team that Nacham Blatt — the soccer player who escaped from the Seventh Fort — is said to have linked with both the massacre and the game

against the Germans. Was this the game that Norkus recalled playing against German police officers?

Norkus says he can't remember the date of the game he played against the Germans.

He also denies that Lithuanian basketball players killed Jews at the Seventh Fort after playing a game against the Germans.

"Nonsense," Norkus says. "No, never. Never, never. Never, never."

In a separate interview, Algirdas Norkus, Vytautas's brother, said that no basketball players participated in the massacre at the Seventh Fort, and that neither he nor his brother played a game against Germans in July in Kaunas.

Alfonsas Eidintas, Lithuania's ambassador to Israel and author of "Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust," says, "We cannot find anything that Lithuanians played Germans at that time."

Algimantas Bertasius, a Lithuanian basketball historian, agrees. He says that Vytautas Norkus did play against a German team in Kaunas, but in 1939, before the war. He, too, says that there was no game between Germans and Lithuanians on July 6, 1941 in Kaunas.

"I would have heard someone mention it or heard a rumor," says Bertasius, who grew up and still lives in Kaunas. "I closely interacted with the players of the time. Nobody spoke about it. There was nothing in the press about the game at all."

But Nazi hunter Efraim Zuroff discounts Bertasius' claim.

"Knowing the Nazi mentality, the mentality of Lithuanian Nazi collaborators and the conditions for Jews in Kaunas during those days," Zuroff says, "I think it's totally obvious that this game did take place. And, of course, the fact that this is recounted in survivor testimony is very important and convincing evidence."

But no direct evidence links either Norkus brother to any such game against Germans or to the massacre at the Seventh Fort. And more than 60 years later, with only second-hand testimony and published reports that can no longer be verified, it may be impossible to prove whether basketball players were among the killers at the Seventh Fort.

"Even today," Eidintas says, "after having a lot of time and a lot of possibilities, we just cannot prove that, indeed, it was and we cannot prove that it wasn't."

"To me, it's unimaginable," says Adamkus, who knew many of the stars of the early 1940s. "I still cannot believe, it's impossible, that those people can commit any crime. But in the world everything happens and you are surprised. So I'm not denying this."

Why, Vytautas Norkus was asked, would anyone make up this story?

"They want to belittle us," he says. "Because that's not true."

Shaking his head, he says, "That's a lie. That's a bad, bad lie." ☆

Jeremy Schaap is a reporter and Willie Weinbaum a producer for ESPN. Copyright 2004 ESPN Internet Ventures. Reprinted courtesy of ESPN.com.