

Scrambling out from the Abyss of Holocaust

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The attitudes of the Lithuanian public towards the genocide of Lithuania's Jews during the Second World War still remain radically controversial. The views of the intellectual elite are increasingly resembling the attitudes which have formed in the West, the education of the society has also been expanding and becoming more profound. Nevertheless, the attitudes of the general public towards the Holocaust have often been determined by the stereotypes inherited from the past.

It is hardly possible to form a consistent picture of the changes that have occurred in the attitudes of the Lithuanian public towards the Holocaust during the last decade. There are several layers of the society in Lithuania which are publicly expressing their response to the legacy of the Holocaust. These are the historians themselves and the intellectual elite, the mass media and politicians, here also are the opinions of the general public, expressed in readers' letters to the newspapers or in the opinion polls.

One thing is clear: during the last several years there has been a notable progress in the public education on the subject of the Holocaust. Holocaust Studies have been included into the high school curriculum, and even into that of the Lithuanian War Academy; there have also been established educational organisations, like the "House of Memory", the Sugihara Foundation in Kaunas, institutions of state investigation – the International Commission for Assessing the Crimes, Committed by Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes – as well as the post of the Ambassador for the Special Missions, which also include relations with the world Jewish organisations. With the support of the Open Society Fund – Lithuania and foreign ambassadors, both translated and authentic books on the subject of the Holocaust and Jewish history are being published one after another, and any attempt on the part of the author of the present article to make even a brief review of all those publications would call for a considerable expansion of the scope of this work. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight such books as "Perpetrators. Victims. Bystanders" by the leading Holocaust researcher Raul Hilberg; "The History of the Lithuanian Jews" by prof. Dovas Levin,

an emigrant from Lithuania who survived the Holocaust in the Kaunas Ghetto; “The Diary of the Kaunas Ghetto” (the manuscript of which was displayed in 1999 at the Washington Holocaust Museum exhibition about the Kaunas Ghetto) by Abraham Tori, a prisoner of the Kaunas Ghetto; publications by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam; the anthology “Echoes of the Lost World”, compiled by Yves Plasseraud, a French doctor of law, essayist and historian; “The Road of Lithuanian Jews”, by the Israeli Saliamonas Atamukas, and many others which could serve as reference sources for those who are interested in the subject. In this year alone, different Lithuanian Publishing Houses will publish at least three translated books on the theme of the Holocaust: an illustrated book-album for high school children by Martin Gilbert “Never again. A History of the Holocaust”, the memoirs of a Šiauliai Ghetto prisoner Nathanas Kacas “Teach Us to Count Our Days”, and the illustrated memoirs of the American painter Samuel Bak, who spent his childhood in the Vilnius Ghetto. And there are many more books to be published in the future, as it is not possible to make a comprehensive study of the Holocaust history in a separate European country without knowing the Jewish history and their, as a minority’s, relations with the ethnical majority of the population. Thus the education of both the public and students in Lithuanian is facing extensive tasks.

Quite another question, however, is the effectiveness of this education. Citizens of Lithuania – similar to most of the post-Soviet societies – have to overcome a number of archaic stereotypes, which restrict thinking and prevent from perceiving the Holocaust and anti-Semitism as the tools of the aggressive policy pursued by the Nazi Germany, and to assess the crimes of their compatriots in executing the Jewish genocide. As a positive trend in this direction, as it has already been mentioned above, ought to be considered the increasingly clearer position taken by the intellectual part of the society in respect to the phenomenon of the Jewish genocide and the denial of its facts in Lithuania. There is no major disagreement on these sensitive issues between such Lithuanian politicians and historians as, say, Liudas Truska, Valentinas Brandišauskas, Alfonsas Eidintas, Arvydas Nikžentaitis, publicists Rimvydas Valatka (“*Lietuvos rytas*”) and Linas Vildžiūnas (“*7 meno dienos*”) on the one side, and the western public opinion, shaped by the activity of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the memoirs of Lithuanian emigrants of Jewish descent, half a century long discussions in the press, and the books by historians M.Gilbert and R.Hilberg, on the other. The determination to have an objective investigation of the cases of Lithuanians’

participation in executing the Holocaust, expressed in a number of statements made by the former Speaker of the Lithuanian Seimas Vytautas Landsbergis, Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, Presidents of Lithuania Algirdas Brazauskas and Valdas Adamkus, should also be included among the positive factors which condition the change in the public opinion.¹

On the other hand, it would be premature to start evaluating the results of this education, as the five decades of the Hitlerite indoctrination, suffocating Soviet silence, fact manipulation, absence of open discussions, and “oppressed mind” (Czeslav Milosz) in general, are still bearing the kind of fruit that thwart the educational efforts. There should be mentioned dozens of anti-Semitic articles published in the daily “*Lietuvos Aidas*”, some of which demonstrated attempts to deny the participation of Lithuanians in the Holocaust or “explain” it by the alleged mass cooperation of Jews with the Soviets; the widely publicised 1999 election to the post of the Mayor of Kaunas, second largest town of Lithuania, of a populist, well known for his anti-Semitic proclamations, as well as the fact that in the public opinion polls, carried out by the Public Opinion and Market Research Centre “Vilmorus” (considered to be the “most representative”), among the nineteen neighbouring nations, Jews were ranked by Lithuanians almost the lowest – below there were only gypsies.² It is interesting to note here that those factors of the public processes in Lithuania which served as a pretext and setting for the upsurge of the anti-Semitic publications in the daily “*Lietuvos Aidas*”, the anti-Semitic tirades of the above-mentioned Kaunas mayor³, as well as the opinions expressed in the polls, are also being gradually unveiled. These are the court trials of that time involving A.Lileikis and K.Gimžauskas, accused of the Holocaust crimes, the image of whom the Lithuanian newspapers (both of limited, such as the reserve officers’ magazine “*Kardas*” and nationwide, like the daily “*Valstiečių laikraštis*”, circulation), with the help of the courts, painted in such a way that, at least at the beginning, they looked

¹ The first statement of this kind in the Restored Republic of Lithuania was issued on 8 May 1990. It was the Statement of the Supreme Council “On the Genocide of the Jewish Nation during the Nazi Occupation”, see Saliamonas Atamukas *Lietuvos žydų kelias* [The Road of the Lithuanian Jews] (Vilnius: Alma Litera, 1998), et al.

² “Vertinimų skalėje – požiūris į kitas tautas,” [On the Scale of Assessment – the Attitude to other Nations] *Lietuvos Rytas*, 14 November 2000.

³ Already after having relinquished his post, and elected member of the Lithuanian Seimas, this gentleman acquired notorious fame when in his interview to the Swedish Channel II programme, shown at the time of the International Tolerance Forum in Stockholm at the end of January this year, he actually praised Hitler for the Holocaust in Lithuania.

like old men of impeccable reputation, submitted to groundless torment by the enemies of the Lithuanian State and foreign conspirators; here also are the Jewish property restitution issues, as well as the public discussion of the documents of the 1941 pro-Nazi Lithuanian Provisional Government in the Seimas of Lithuania early in the autumn of 2000.

In the light of such facts, the vast differences between the western and Lithuanian public opinion in respect to the Jewish genocide during the Second World War are becoming evident. Thus, a scandal immediately erupted in the American and British press as soon as the historian David Irving just denied the existence of gas cameras in the Nazi concentration camps (see, for example, “*The Daily Telegraph*”, 12 April 2000). In Lithuania, however, there abound, and have become almost habitual, the attitudes which present a distorted view of the Holocaust⁴. This was also noticed by Professor Marija Gražina Slavėnienė who published an article in the U.S. Lithuanian press “Lithuanians Fail to Understand the Western Conception of the Holocaust”⁵. It has also become evident that the ignorance in respect of the history of the Holocaust and the Jews, as well as the anti-Semitic stereotypes, considerably impede the Jewish-Lithuanian relations. In his research, carried out for the University of Vilnius and the Australian Christianity Research Centre, “Anti-Semitism in the Lithuanian Press of 1989-1998”, a script writer for documentary films Jonas Morkus wrote about extreme reactions of the Lithuanian public opinion to the painful issues of the Holocaust: “The tension has mounted for several reasons. Firstly, the participants in the massacre and plunder of Jews are still alive and feel a moral necessity to justify their deeds. The emigrants, among whom there were more than a few Jewish killers, try the hardest. Other emigrants brought with them the wartime attitudes, where the animosity against the Jews was to a great extent fanned by the Nazi propaganda and the desire to find culprits for the loss of Lithuania (its independence) and its surrender to all outside forces... The second source of tension is the idealisation of the past.”⁶ And the attitudes like that, likewise the former languid work of the Lithuanian institutions in investigating Holocaust cases, the *en masse* rehabilitation of the persons convicted by the Soviet courts, among whom there also were the real criminals of

⁴ “Žydai bent jau turėjo žinoti, už ką juos žudo” [Jews at least had to know why they were being killed], A. Nesavas “Vienakė Temidė,” [The One-eyed Themis] *Kauno diena*, 11 November 1998.

⁵ *Akiračiai*, June 1998.

war, come handy to those extremists in the Jewish organisations who do not believe in the ability of Lithuanians to make an objective assessment of their past, and who do not want to notice the progress of the present-day Lithuania in the sphere of Holocaust education and investigation: “On the one hand, Lithuanians seek membership in the international organisations, NATO in particular, while Americans see their acceptance as problematic due to the repulsive image of Lithuanians which has been formed by the references to the Jewish killings. On the other hand, Lithuania itself is reluctant to make a public acknowledgement of those gruesome crimes that Lithuanians committed against Jews during the Second World War, and in every possible way is trying to conceal the truth and the facts”⁷. This quotation is taken from an article which appeared in the publication of the Israeli “*litvaks*” association. This radical article blames even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel for allegedly succumbing to the “American pressure”, which, by the way, strongly resembles the Lithuanian radicals who censure the Lithuanian authorities for yielding to the pressure of the American and Jewish organisations in the attempts at investigating both the history of the Holocaust and individual cases. The author tends to overlook even such internationally known recent developments in the life Lithuanian State as the law adopted by the Seimas of Lithuania in 2000, which enables persons accused of war crimes to be tried *in absentia*, as well as the fact that, under the pressure of the public and the combined efforts of journalists, politicians and intellectuals, there was cancelled the infamous draft law which intended to turn the Declaration of the 1941 pro-Nazi Provisional Government into a legal act of the present-day Lithuanian State. Such expressions of public activism in regard to the issues of top importance is a new and welcome feature of the growing intellectual maturity of the society.

At the present time, the above-mentioned International Commission, established by the President of Lithuania Adamkus in 1998, is preparing to discuss the

⁶ See *Subliuškę mitai. Mintys, argumentai, polemika*. Ed.by Saliamonas Vaintraubas (Vilnius: Lietuvos žydų bendruomenė, 2000) [The Vanished Myths. Thoughts, Arguments, Polemic.” Compiled by Saliamonas Vaintraubas, Vilnius, Lithuanian Jewish Community, 2000].

⁷ A periodic bulletin of the Lithuanian Jewish Association. Article “International Committee” by Yosef E. Melamed. It is alleged in this same article that the International Commission in Lithuania has been established rather to conceal than to reveal the truth about the Holocaust, and the scientists of the International Institute for Holocaust Research in Jerusalem are requested to abstain from participating in the work of the Lithuanian Commission. The publications of the same Association, issued in English and Ivrit, presented lists with thousands of Lithuanian surnames, allegedly belonging to persons who participated in Jewish killings during the World War II years. The Lithuanian Commission, now in the third year of its existence, has not yet issued any summarising information about the number of Lithuanians who participated in the Holocaust.

research of the sensitive issues which are of great importance for the public education in Lithuania, the Jewish-Lithuanian relations, and for the State of Lithuania as a whole. These are: “The Holocaust and Lithuanian police battalions”, “The Holocaust in the Lithuanian province”, “Jewish massacre during the first days of the Nazi-Soviet war”, “Jewish massacre in Lithuania in the summer and autumn of 1941”, “Anti-Semitism as a Holocaust prerequisite”. The reports are being prepared or have already been submitted to the Commission by German, American and Lithuanian scientists in cooperation with the International Institute for the Holocaust Research Yad Vashem in Israel. It may be believed that the promulgation of the conclusions of these works, and the ensuing publication of the works themselves, will stir the necessary response within the Lithuanian society and help to discard the myths and stereotypes, nurtured during the long years of ignorance. All this will probably take place within the context of other social and institutional processes: in training the Holocaust teachers in Lithuania and abroad, during the court trials of the persons accused of war crimes (as it is known from the press, the Lithuanian State Prosecutor’s Office has already sent to England an extradition request for A.Gečas, suspected in committing war crimes), and in dealing with the Jewish property restitution issues. It should be believed that the Holocaust studies in Lithuania will bridge the gap between the Lithuanian and Western public opinion on these delicate issues, and the quality Lithuanian mass media will present a different coverage of these issues than it was customary to do ten years ago, in the process of awakening from more than half a century long slumber of mind, spirit and conscience.

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