

LITHUANIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS: PAPER JUSTICE

by Valdas Vasiliauskas (in *Lietuvos žinios*, 10 September 2008)

At the end of the summer a friend called and said: “BBC is making a television documentary film on Lithuanian-Jewish relations. Could you talk about this in front of the British camera?” In other words, comment on the paper war, which is going on since one Lithuanian daily published an article about the Kaniūkai village tragedy during World War II? “Not very interesting at a time when there is a real war in the Caucasus,” I replied, carelessly turning down the opportunity.

I did not comprehend why for the world media, Lithuanian-Jewish relations became important again and that paper justice was to blame for this, and that it will cost God knows how much for Lithuania.

The extent of damage, done to the state by this artificially raised and completely pointless scandal could not be comprehended even the head of the government G. Kirkilas, when he was paying his first official visit to the USA this summer. A meeting of the Lithuanian Prime Minister with an influential Jewish community in New York was included into the program of the visit.

Certainly, G. Kirkilas prepared for the visit carefully, reflected on the answers to the most unpleasant questions – first of all, the restitution to the Jews and this hapless construction of King Mindaugas apartments on the Jewish cemetery. However, the Jews in New York had a more important question to ask than the restitution and they caught G. Kirkilas napping: Why is Lithuania blaming former Ghetto prisoners and Holocaust victims? G. Kirkilas tried to speak about the prosecutors’ independence and the non-intervention by the state into the pre-trial investigations that were under way, but raised a suspicion among the Jews that he was avoiding the answer. After that an article about Lithuanians avoiding responsibility for Holocaust was published in the biggest American Jewish daily [sic] “Forward”.

That was just the beginning. Now can can read about the attempts of Lithuanians to evade responsibility also in the famous “Economist.” And it will not all end just with words. At the end of August, the German “Neues Deutschland” (from which I learned German during the years of occupation, when it was a Communist newspaper, now it is socialist) wrote with gusto about the massacre of Jews, organised by the “German Fascists and their Lithuanian helpers” and added: an open collective letter to the European Parliament is being written, in which they ask withdrawal of the title Capital of European Culture from Vilnius.

See what a mash we have now, because of one irresponsible article in a newspaper, after which the Lithuanian General Prosecutor’s office started a reckless investigation and announced it to the whole world, even though it is evident that this paper

investigation has not even the slightest prospect. The state has officially acknowledged the genocide of the nation in the postwar period; however, how many Communist collaborators were sentenced? Maybe the Prosecutor General's Office could explain why in the Kaniūkai massacre case (the Red Partisans murdered 38 Lithuanian farmers) they accentuated the Jewish aspect, even though evidence remains that only Russians were doing the shooting?

Did Lithuanian prosecutors demonstrate courage and integrity when they demanded that three Jewish pensioners should be questioned, one of them being a national hero in Israel, chairman of the Yad Vashem museum Yitzhak Arad, who is also a member of Emanuelis Zingeris's International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania? Outraged by the Lithuanian Prosecutor General's Office, Y. Arad resigned from the commission.

No matter, whether it is a conscious provocation or simple stupidity, but it threw Lithuania, a member of EU and NATO, back by a decade, when the state had to fight for its right to return to Western civilization and prove that it is worthy of being in the company of democratic countries. It seemed that we had got rid of two myths forever, the authors of which are the Gestapo and the KGB. Now the ghosts of this past have come back again.

First, there are those horrible propaganda lies of Joseph Goebbels that the Communists and the Jews are almost synonymous. The Soviet Union, as a secretly anti-Semitic country, supported this lie willingly: it was noticed a long time ago that in the security services, the ministries, and party organs there used to be a few Jews, who would not make any decisions, but would be obligated to do the most unpleasant work (this was a secret campaign promoting anti-Semitic attitudes).

The second ghost of the past, which has now come back, comprises the Gestapo instigated lies that were later elaborated by the KGB about the participation of the Lithuanian nation in the Holocaust. The idealists who grew up in the times of independent Lithuania, the so-called activists and partisans on 23 June 1941 with white bands, were apparently not fighters for the freedom of the nation, but a bunch of killers. The last time I encountered this falsification of history was during the first years of independence, when I had a chance to debate with KGB colonel Aleksandr Slavin. I was surprised how willingly a solid weekly of the Democratic Republic of Germany *Die Zeit* published these falsifications by the KGB colonel. The Germans would love to share their responsibility for the Holocaust with the Lithuanians, even though antisemitism was at the core of Nazi ideology and the motor of the Third Reich; already in 1939 Nazi party leaders made a decision on the "final solution of the Jewish problem."

Preparing the rejoinder to A. Slavin and the German *Die Zeit*, I appealed to the official Nürnberg trial "Document L-180." I marvel the treachery of the Gestapo, with the help of which the Nazis applied all means seeking to "show the world that the local residents (i.e. Lithuanians) had started to act against the Jews themselves, as a natural reaction to oppression, which the Jews had practiced for several decades." But, according to the author of this document, SS General Franc W. Stahlecker, "local residents" did not show a big wish to "act against the Jews." The SS General writes about the first days of the war, when Kaunas was occupied: "To our surprise, it

appeared that it was not that easy to organize a pogrom against the Jews.” I wondered even more that this Document L-180 was published in Moscow, New York, and Tel Aviv; however, both Lithuanian and foreign historians are persistently repeating the libel against the Lithuanian nation by SS General F.W. Stahlecker and KGB colonel A. Slavin.

Lithuanians were already not the masters in their own country, which turned into a grave for 200,000 Jews, as the Soviets had destroyed not just the state and all of its institutions; they had destroyed civil society and left it emptied of authorities (by killing and exiling them), mass media, and had closed down all parties and organizations. Who in this Nobody’s Land could curb criminals, sadists and other pathological personalities, provoked and protected by the Gestapo? Certainly, we can only bow our heads and feel sorry that there were too many of those fiends, as compared to the righteous people who saved Jews.

But after all, according to philosopher Hannah Arendt, in those days Europe was facing a crisis of human solidarity, when even the Vatican watched the catastrophe of the Jewish nation with appeasement. And, by contrast, during any discussion and in any auditorium I can repeat that I am proud of the provisional government of Juozas Brazaitis [acting Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Lithuania at that time], which sent its representatives to protest to the German military leaders concerning the massacre that had been started of Jews in Kaunas. I am proud of the professors of Lithuanian universities and all the intellectuals who safeguarded the youth in the country from wearing the shameful SS uniform and who were condemned to be sent to Shutoff for disrupting the mobilization. We ourselves keep silent about our anti-Nazi resistance, so why would others remember it?

Obviously, an intellectual discussion will hardly be possible as long as we do not punish a single former or present day citizen of Lithuania, whose hands are stained with Jewish blood. How many of those nationals have remained? To this question E. Zingeris’s Commission should have answered long time ago, but it turned into another institution-of-paper. Why does the Commission not give us a final listing of the criminals, which would free the Lithuanian nation from the burden of collective responsibility forever?