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Lietuvos Rytas

Discussions

Pure-blooded Lithuanians Need Jewish Litvaks

by Monika Bončkutė

January 21, 2010 12:40 PM

What do Ben Bernanke, the head of the Federal Reserve leading the United States to economic recovery; one of the most-famous American singers of all time, Bob Dylan; the rocker Pink; British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen and French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas all have in common?

All these people have roots in Lithuania. As do hundreds of thousands, or perhaps even millions, of Jews around the world, whose parents were driven from our country by the Tsar's restrictions, fellow Lithuanians withdrawn into a closed farming culture and the mass murder organized by the Nazis in World War II.

What would Lithuania look like now as we enter the second decade of the 21st century, if almost all Lithuanian Jews had not been exterminated during the last century, and instead of 50 years of the artificial "friendship of nations" promulgated by the Soviets, our parents and grandparents had lived as true citizens of the free world?

What would the map of Lithuanian politics, economics, art and pop culture look like if Jews today comprised seven percent of the Lithuanian population

as they did before World War II? Maybe we would have had, finally, a Nobel Prize winner, world-renowned actors and actresses and highly capable businesspeople and politicians.

Who knows, Sacha Baron Cohen might have made “Borat” in Lithuania, and Binyamin Netanyahu would now be prime minister of Lithuania, and would now be preparing a plan for the improvement of our country’s economic situation and solving complicated relations with Russia instead of tackling the problem of peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Last year we marked Lithuania’s millennium, this year we will celebrate twenty years since the re-establishment of Lithuanian Independence. So far we have spent in total around 60 million litas for the government to create Lithuania’s image [improve and propagate country’s image abroad], but the only thing we are really known for is probably that two Lithuanians have made it on the United Kingdom’s most wanted list.

Perhaps now that the first decade of the 21st century has passed, a decade of terrorism, war and economic crisis Time magazine recently said was “sent from hell,” it would be a good time to learn from the mistakes of history and to start to build Lithuania’s image and civil society upon foundations of tolerance and inclusiveness?

I bet money that a video clip presenting Lithuania as the land of the parents and grandparents of world famous artists, scientists and politicians would be much more successful than some guy named Jonas making clown faces and pushing boring facts about Lithuania in the form of a deck of cards on the screen, telling the world how well Mazeikiu Oil is doing.

Of course, it needs to be told to a society dripping with anti-Semitism and intolerance in general that the most famous people from Lithuania and those who have achieved the most in the world are Jews. Jews who call themselves Litvaks coming from the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania who immigrated to Western Europe and the US did not spend their time idly.

Jascha Heifetz, the wunderkind born in Vilnius, used to play for the picky audience in Kaunas when he was seven, until he entered the US and became one of the most famous violinists in the world, ever.

The Howard brothers, fathers of Vaudeville and comedy in America, known as “The Three Stooges” also have Lithuanian roots. As does American composer Philip Glass. This grandchild of Lithuanian Jews is one of the most famous composers of the end of the 20th century and works with some of the most famous artists in the world, including Canadian singer and descendant of Lithuanian Jews Leonard Cohen.

You could continue this list indefinitely, because in every country in the West, wherever there is a moderate-sized Jewish community, you will find those who say they come from Lithuania.

Ben Bernanke, whose grandfather registered as Jonas Bernanke at the Immigration Registration Center at Ellis Island in New York, was Time magazine’s man of the year last year. A Time editorial claimed that if not for the chairman of the Federal Reserve, there would be a much worse economic situation in America and the world right now.

Incidentally, this was probably the first time the Lithuanian origin of the US “finance czar” was mentioned in the press. Only in the issue of Time dedicated to Bernanke was it noted that the grandparents of the head of the Federal Reserve Bank survived pogroms in Lithuania.

Before the anti-Semites open their filthy mouths, I would like to remind them that practically every head of a Hollywood studio, many actors and actresses and Nobel Prize winners of all fields are of Jewish origin. But they speak English, and are understood first as Americans. Does America benefit from this? Undoubtedly.

Try to picture the film industry without Harrison Ford, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker or Zack Efron.

What if Americans had slaughtered Jews as the Nazis did in our country with the help of Lithuanians? It’s possible that the US would even now not have one of its most influential cultural icons, Hollywood.

As if it weren’t enough that the contribution of Lithuanian Jews and their descendants was not appropriately recognized when Independence was restored [1990-1991], recently anti-Semitism has only been gaining ground in Lithuania.

In 1991, 10% of respondents said they didn't view Jews favorably, i.e., four times less than now. According to results of a survey conducted by the Pew Research center, in 2009 some 37 percent of Lithuanian residents said they viewed Jews negatively.

Viewed from outside, this appears totally incomprehensible and unjustified. Currently just under 3,500 Jews live in Lithuania, so the possibility that the 3.5 million people living in the country, mainly "pure" Lithuanians, are personally acquainted with even one Jewish family is quite small.

Our forefathers looked askew at Jews because they were farmers shut in to their own world, while many Jews were merchants. For them, Jews were probably the most foreign group of people. But at least they met Jews at the store or when Jews came calling with their goods at their farms.

But now, self-respecting citizens of the independent Lithuanian state that belongs to international organizations, many of whom have never during their life even had a beer with a Jew, never mind any deeper acquaintance, feel themselves entitled to judge negatively the entire Jewish people.

And now for a bit of statistics: 92% of Americans believe that diversity is good for society. Only 51% of Lithuanian share this view. This is also one of the lowest indicators for the value of diversity in Europe.

Will we be able, in 2010, to draw the interest of the world as a country of pure-blooded, blue-blooded Lithuanians, not just for surrendering our most creative and intelligent members during occupations, wars or through stupidity, but also for the stubborn persistence of our fear of diversity?

TRANSLATED BY GEOFF VASIL / VILNIUS