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## The Holocaust in Lithuania: Too Early to Forget by Algimantas Kasparavičius, [www.DELFI.lt](http://www.DELFI.lt)

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The article “The Holocaust in Lithuania: One Man’s Crusade Seeking Justice” that appeared on the CNN website accused Lithuania and Lithuanians of avoiding judgment and condemnation of the Holocaust in a fitting manner. Although the CNN audience is influential and multi-million, there was no appropriate reaction to the publication in Lithuania.

This situation causes double vision: either everything in the article was said correctly, Lithuanians agree with everything and have nothing more to add, or compatriots remain frightened and repressed *homo-sovieticus* folks who, although they don’t agree with the other position and arguments, nourish revenge in the secret depths of their heart.

With the civilized world watching, the accusations heaped upon the CNN website are grave, so they must be reacted to seriously. The country’s president, government, other institutions and society should make the appropriate conclusions. It’s bad that the accusations aired on the CNN webpage are partially true, but partially exaggerated or simply made up. This situation creates a kind of emotional bomb aimed at Lithuania and Lithuanians. The average European or American will not look too deeply into the details of the charges and will take a general view. The details personified so emotionally in the publication will simply reinforce or confirm a negative view of Lithuania in his consciousness. It can’t be rejected that that was exactly what certain interests were seeking.

It is clear that over twenty years of independence Lithuania has pursued in a sparse manner those World War II war criminals who carried out genocide. Investigations by prosecutors and trials were in many cases rather formal, without reaching the essence. Sometimes it was even similar to legal sabotage. Responsibility for that falls to the prosecution: former and current leaders [chief prosecutors?]. And also to politicians who were primarily responsible for the work of state institutions.

The problem was exacerbated as well by lack of timely desovietization and half-hearted lustration in the country which allowed legal nihilism to flourish. Perhaps the most tragicomic example of legal nihilism in Lithuania is that there exists in the country the Genocide Victims Museum and the Center for the Study of Genocide and Resistance, who propagate the theory that the government of the USSR exterminated Lithuanians on a national/ethnic basis, while at the same time a judge sits on the Constitutional Court who, during the Sajudis [movement for Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union] period, defended her dissertation in Moscow which turns this theory in principle upside down.

On the other hand, there is Efraim Zuroff's charge that Lithuania "has not accepted responsibility for the Holocaust collectively." The statement is offensive in three ways: 1) he wants to push Lithuania back into the times of barbarism when individual punishments were meted out collectively; 2) Israel and Zuroff, I believe, well know of president Algirdas Brazauskas's apology to all Jews for the Holocaust that took place on Lithuanian territory and the participation of individual Lithuanians in it. 3) what kind of collective regret by Lithuania can be spoken of, since during the Holocaust there was no Lithuanian state: no government and no other institutions of statehood. Therefore neither was there political will by Lithuanians. Lithuania was occupied by the Soviets, then later by the Nazis.

In the years 1941-1944 it was an occupied territory of the Third Reich. Nazi German officials exclusively made all binding decisions. Nazi Germany also organized and carried out the Holocaust: her government, military, administration and local helpers – several thousand Lithuanians, who also did not serve Lithuania, they served the "thousand-year" Reich. Its interests, policy and ideology.

Despite that, the Holocaust was and remains Lithuania's tragedy as well, because it was carried out on her territory. Lithuania lost 7 percent of her residents due to the Shoah policy. The loss deeply changed the country: it impoverished it culturally, intellectually. It reduced prospects for progress. But when speaking about responsibility for the Holocaust in Lithuania, we can only talk about specific criminals, their numbers and their crimes. But in no way can [talk] about the nation, society, the country. The Lithuanian state and Lithuanians in the broader sense are not connected with the Holocaust ideology, nor with its organization or execution, in any way.

It's unfair to compare Lithuania with Germany. [It's unfair] To argue that the Germans have paid billions for the genocide of the Jews. The Nazis, who seized the largest state in

continental Europe in 1933, made the Holocaust part of industry. A profitable branch, which profited the enterprises of some other countries as well as the Third Reich. This didn't happen in Lithuania and it couldn't have, because there was neither a state nor a government.

But complaints about the exhibits of the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius are accurate and balanced. Sadly, this is a kind of proof of the two-faced morality and macular degeneration of the current Lithuanian political elite. Like the attempts to compare or equate the Holocaust with the crimes of the Soviet regime in Lithuania or even to vindicate Lithuanians in a strange manner through [the Soviet crimes].

Such a position leads to an ethical dead end and heavily warps the general picture. It forms dangerous ideological simulacra and hallucinations in unenlightened minds. It fuels different phobias and insinuations in [a] culturally and politically immature and morally indifferent society. This viewpoint comes to us from the Lithuania of Sajudis, when it was rather popular to use the so-called "double genocide" theory to argue that the Shoah in Lithuania was merely a response to the Soviet terror of 1940-1941. This ideological vestige needs to be thrown out as quickly as possible.

That the state institution in the center of Vilnius called the Museum of Genocide Victims has ignored the Holocaust right up to the present appears rather surreal. How can the Genocide Museum, established in a city that lost about 40 percent of its residents during WWII and even one of its three titular ethnicities, not include among its exhibits the facts of this loss? Good sense finds this difficult to understand. It is strange that this fact hasn't been noticed by anyone in Lithuania up to the present time: beginning with leaders of the state and their advisors, Parliament, members of the government and ending with intellectuals.

It is this pitiful policy that arouses scandals in the world today, allowing Lithuanians to be branded "Jew-shooters". If we don't respect ourselves, why should others? What will a Lithuanian feel and what will the world think about Lithuania if the "error" in the Genocide Victims Museum exhibits is only corrected after the degrading publication on the CNN website? What are we: a state or just a territory, free citizens or just tenants on some land, governed by the thoughts of foreigners?

Considerations heard in Lithuania's public space to the effect that perhaps it is now time to put a full stop at the end of the Jew-shooters topic also give rise to mixed thoughts. I can't imagine how it is possible to finally explain everything in one or another area of history and then make some mystical full stop. I don't even believe that the criminal code amendments recently approved by Parliament on interpretations of modern Lithuanian history will set down some positive full stop in the development of the science of history.

After all, based on common sense and logic, now all nostrifications [acceptance?] for dissertations whose contents or conclusions violate this law must now be immediately rescinded. And that means the social status of some people must change with all the ensuing consequences of that. But that won't happen. That means it will be possible to

continue to quote from those dissertations, to make use of their “moral value” in other texts or in applying for jobs. So why, then, are there these laws, which don’t work, but do further degrade the already poor understanding of [human, legal] rights among citizens?

We live in times of relativism, in a post-modern global world. And therefore Lithuanians will ponder and argue for a long time to come what happened in June of 1940 or from 1941 to 1944 in Lithuania, how it happened and why it happened. Why did one part of Lithuanian society willingly join the Communist Party, welcome Soviet tanks with flowers or speeches on June 15, 1940, in Kaunas, while another part of Lithuanian society in the same city later send flowers and words of gratitude to the occupiers from the West?

Why did the professors of Vytautas Magnus University (rector Gravrogkas, secretary Grinius, deacons Brizgyz, Kairys, Ivinskis, etc.) in spring of 1942, when the scope and results of the Holocaust in Lithuania were already clear to everyone, still prostitute themselves in their worry over the fate of the university with the Nazis, appealing on the basis of the “the friendly and total support of the Lithuanian society” to the Nazis in summer of 1941, or reminding them that “the Lithuanian nation supports the march of the German military in the East with all its material resources and the blood of its volunteers”? What does this kind of “diplomacy” signify: the extremist ethical conformity of Lithuanians, the desire to adapt and survive at any cost, or, in fact, a certain moral sinkhole and spiritual idolatry?

It is a little strange that Lithuania, which has special research centers, has still been unable to sufferably investigate the topic of so-called Jew-shooters. It appears that there is not a single monograph or dissertation in Lithuania that dispassionately and convincingly analyzes even the problem of the infamous Lithuanian self-defense battalions. Their personnel, social composition, their “marches” in Lithuania, Belarus and Russia have been researched. How many people participated in executions, how many filled auxiliary roles, and did society support them?

But special lists of Jew-shooters in Lithuania are hardly needed. There’s no need to turn history into an ideological stage show or a show trial. Lists of Jew-shooters should only exist as parts or appendices of this or that (dissertation) monograph. But not like some separate, self-confirming, exotic reversed Star of David, intended for marking Lithuanians who betrayed humanity. As far as I know, the French, Czechs, Croats, Serbs, Estonians, Austrian and Germans do not have such lists.

I even more strongly don’t believe that our institutions should blindly grasp at the list made famous in Israel with the idea “to once and for all investigate the lists of Lithuanian Jew-shooters which allow some to draw the conclusion that almost the entire nation approved or participated in Jew-shooting.” The philosophy/methodology of this kind of “investigation” will bear the expected fruit and will not invalidate Jew-shooting by Lithuanians. Because *a priori* this “methodology” supposes that it must deny something.

Considering it more broadly, it is clear that the moral quality and values of our society today, unfortunately, do not allow forgetting the topic of Jew-shooters. Lithuanian society is still not ready for this. We still understand the problem of the Shoah in Lithuania in a too-primitive manner. The mass murder of Jews in Lithuania has still not been thought through and considered, has not become part of us and has not become [our sense of] repentance. We don't need special investigations or to read many thick books to make sure of this. It is sufficient to stroll among the old, overgrown graves in the Jewish cemeteries or the sites of execution anywhere in Zemaitija, in Tryskai, in Zagare, or to speak for a while with the people [there].

It has to be said that Lithuanians in the 21st century are modernizing more slowly than was expected. Roughly the same portion of Lithuanian society who say that "Landsbergis destroyed the collective farms" believe in "the ever-present Jewish conspiracy," and in [dark] corners [will] say that Jews are evil, that "they got what they deserved" during the Nazi occupation because "they were Communists," they met Russian tanks with flowers, "they deported us." At private parties, after two or three glasses of whiskey, even some directors of prestigious Vilnius schools talk like this. And it's not strange that there are one or two history teachers who think like this. What is strange is that fellow party-goers are completely unsurprised by this, and eagerly philosophize on this theme until midnight.

In other words, the popular slogan in Tsarist times, "bey zhydov spasay Rossiyu," is in a certain sense still gaining momentum in Lithuania. Recently I had the opportunity to speak *tête-à-tête* with a reporter from a Russian newspaper. The attractive woman passionately and sincerely argued that Jews did the revolution in Russia, that Lenin's "roots" and those of the entire party leadership were Jewish, and that Lenin simply "hated Russia and Russians." Read: the crimes of Communism against nations, personalities and religions are also the handiwork of the Chosen People.

The causes of [reasons for] anti-Semitism in Lithuania are diverse: cultural, religious, personal, economic, ideological. But Lithuanians can't claim the "honor" of being the inventors of anti-Semitism. Historical sources show that Jews were first subject to persecution in Christian civilization in England in the 13th century. The English were the first to accuse the Jews of ritual murder and desecration of the host.

In the 14th-16th centuries this trend became popular in Spain, France and the German lands. Poland learned about the Jewish "damage" in the 15th century, and Lithuania in the 16th century. But anti-Semitism did not become popular in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* over the entire history of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy presents barely one case, of a Jewish man accused of ritual murder. That there was no great religio-social or cultural anti-Semitism in the Grand Duchy is also shown by the fact that Jews often appear as witnesses or accusers rather than as the accused in early witch trials, unlike in most Western states.

Of course that doesn't mean that Old Lithuania had no anti-Semitism. Just as today, back then intellectuals were primary propagators of all sorts of negative "modernisms." Social critic Mykolas Lietuvis liked to bad-mouth Jews in the 16th century. And the first rector

of Vilnius University, Jesuit Petras Skarga also [bad-mouthed Jews]. University students liked to go berserk in the homes of rich Jews or in [Jewish] shops. Pogroms increased dramatically after good marks at the tavern [?] during student holidays [not vacations, but special celebration days for students, apparently].

Ancient Lithuanian ethnic tolerance needs to be seen less as some sort of special spiritual mystical feature of the Lithuanian *ethnos*, which is often claimed although no one can describe it, and more with the world-view and policies of the Lithuanian ruling elite. Jewish merchants, craftsmen or woodcarvers [?] were politically the least threatening and cheapest, hardiest and most-easily accessed instrument for the modernization of the society/state, for the young state ruled by Lithuanians stretching to the East, as far back as the times of Gediminas and Vytautas. This tradition took firm hold for the entire Lithuanian dynasty. Thus the last Jagelloid Zygmunt [Zygmantas] Augustus was wont to tell Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Jews “I am not the king of your souls...”

This tradition was also taken over after February 16, 1918 [proclamation of first Lithuanian Republic] when Litvak Jews with wide contacts in Europe, the USA and Russia became necessary to the Lithuanian political elite first in establishing state borders, receiving recognition abroad and in the struggle for Vilnius and Klaipeda [Memel]. It was namely for these reasons and circumstances that some Jewish figures were for some time included in governments, and invited to diplomatic service or other high posts of the state.

The power structure also quieted open economic, and partially religious anti-Semitism during periods of parliamentary democracy and the authoritarian regime by a specific cultural policy, with the aid of censorship or police. Sometimes by the authoritative word of president Antanas Smetona, whom the local Jewish elite often simply called “our father,” while fascistic Lithuanian nationalists called him “the Jew-boys’ president.”

But, as later events showed, this was not an effective solution to the problem. Bans did not drive anti-Semitism from the souls of Lithuanians, it just gutterized it. During the Nazi occupation the barrel of Lithuanian anti-Semitism exploded and all that sewage came gushing forth. At the first available opportunity in full force, fully capacity and full horror. The racist ideology of the Nazis only untied the hands of Lithuanians in summer of 1941; their souls had erred to the “final solution” in Lithuania long before.

To recap, the question of the physical annihilation of the Jews on Lithuanian territory during the Second World War remains controversial and with many unknowns remaining. The topic was abandoned because of the Soviet occupation and annexation. Until its very downfall in 1991, the Soviet power structure tolerated and even encouraged a quiet, soft anti-Semitism. On the other hand, while the Soviet period in Lithuania was favorable to the demographic curve of Lithuanians, it essentially increased low-grade Lithuanian boosterism [Lithuanian-ness, Lithuanian national identity]. A rather surrogate Lithuanian-ness with ethno-Soviet nationalism, [sort of like] the former dance and song ensemble Lietuva.

It is possible that Lithuania's present mental distancing from Western culture and civilization was increased by those 200,000 Lithuanian Jews who went to their graves too early in their Jerusalem of the North. Who could've become, if not for the fault of our fellow citizens, today's Perlsteins, Arbit Blats or Romain Garys of Lithuania. They could have helped us, but now they won't. And that means we will have to create our cultural memory, national identity and commemorative policies in the 21st century all by ourselves. But not just for ourselves.

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