

The Vanished World of the Litvaks

by

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Since 1990 Lithuanian political culture has demonstrated a new political willingness and ability to accommodate minorities, their languages and cultures. Lithuanian mainstream politics has had much success in embracing, or at least not alienating, the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian minorities.

We could mention here some minor tensions with Lithuanian Poles in the late 1980s that reflected the dramatic history of Vilnius and its surrounding area in the 20th century, but this is no longer the case – Poland and Lithuania recently reached an historic breakthrough in their relations to become very close allies and strategic partners.

At the same time, Lithuania has even become a sort of refuge against censorship and political persecution in neighbouring lands. As for the most fragile and vulnerable stateless cultures and minorities deeply grounded in Lithuanian history, these are more or less at home in present-day Lithuania. The existence of small groups, such as Tatars, Karaims, and Roma, does not, for example, cause conflicts.

Things are, however, far more complicated with regard to the Jewish minority. The problem for Lithuanian Jews is that quite a large sector of Lithuanian society – including not a few representatives of the intelligentsia – is still inclined to consider the Jews as collectively responsible for the mass killings and deportations of civilians, as well as for other atrocities committed during the Soviet occupation on the eve of the Second World War.

This represents the disgraceful adoption of the Nazi rhetoric that equated Communism with the Jews. In an effort to modify the charges that Lithuanians participated in the mass killings of Jews in 1941 and after, some Lithuanians have spoken of “two genocides”, or – as some Jewish writers have called it – “symmetry” in the suffering of both peoples.

The notorious theory attributing the disasters that befell Lithuania to Lithuanian Jews, which has been deeply embedded up to now in Lithuanian political discourse and popular consciousness, regards a Jewish segment of the Soviet regime as having been decisive. At the same time, this theory includes considerations of allegedly subversive and treacherous activities on the eve of the Second World War of local Jewry, with the latter perceived as lacking in loyalty, patriotism and civic-mindedness. Hence, a derivative theory of two genocides developed, which provides an assessment of the Holocaust and of local collaboration with the Nazis in terms of the revenge for the Soviet genocide of local population. It is little wonder, then, that the theory of two genocides, which is just another term for the theory of the collective guilt of the Jews, has been qualified by Tomas Venclova, a pro-

minent Lithuanian poet and literary scholar who teaches literature at Yale University, as “troglodytic”, thus characterising people who are inclined to practice it as moral troglodytes. Regrettably, Lithuania has failed to bring war criminals to justice and provide an unambiguous legal assessment of those Lithuanians who were active in the Holocaust.¹

Also problematic is the parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures, and it has been so for centuries. Anti-Semitism is by no means the only attitude to the Jews that can be ascribed accurately to Lithuanians. The predominant attitude may better be described as insensitivity to, and defensiveness about, inconvenient aspects of the past. The alienation of the Jews from their host countries and their cultures is more likely to have been a tragedy for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, and should not be seen as confined to Lithuania.

The parallel existence of Lithuanian and Jewish cultures may therefore be regarded as the outcome of the afore-mentioned alienation. These two cultures may never have achieved mutual understanding, to say nothing of achieving an interpretative framework within which to embrace or critically question one another. Prior to the Second World War, Lithuania was famous for its very large Jewish community (about 250,000 Jews lived in Lithuania; only 20,000 survived the Holocaust).² The Lithuanian capital, Vilnius – occupied by Poland from 1920 to 1939 – was known around the world as the Jerusalem of the North, and many internationally eminent Jews lived in or were from Lithuania, among them the philosophers Emmanuel Lévinas and Aron Gurwitsch, the painters Chaïm Soutine (a close friend of Amedeo Modigliani in Paris) and Arbit Blatas, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, the violinist Jascha Heifetz, and the art critic Bernard Berenson, one of the most sophisticated 20th century students of the Italian Renaissance.

Yet none of these individuals was ever considered a significant actor in Lithuanian culture – despite the fact that it was they who inscribed Lithuania’s name on the intellectual and cultural map of the twentieth-century world. Why? The answer is very simple: the Russian-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jewish community in Lithuania was always alienated from the Lithuanian inter-war intelligentsia, which, for its part, cultivated linguistic and cultural nationalism both as a means of self-definition, and as a way of distinguishing rurally oriented Lithuanian compatriots (that is, the organic

¹ For more on Tomas Venclova’s assessment of anti-Semitic rhetoric and the theory of the two genocides, see TOMAS VENCLOVA: *Forms of Hope. Essays*, Riverdale-on-Hudson/NY 1999; IDEM: *Vilties formos. Eseiistika ir publicistika* [Forms of Hope. Essays and Reviews], Vilnius 1991. For more on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories developed in Lithuania and other Central/East European countries after the Second World War, see LEONIDAS DONSKIS: *Forms of Hatred. The Troubled Imagination in Modern Philosophy and Literature*, Amsterdam – New York 2003.

² For more on this issue, see *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, ed. by ALVYDAS NIKŽENTAITIS, DARIUS STALIŪNAS and STEFAN SCHREINER, Amsterdam – New York 2004.

community; in Ferdinand Tönnies's terms, *Gemeinschaft*) from "rootless", cosmopolitan urban professionals (the mechanised, fragmented, diversified society, i.e. *Gesellschaft*). Despite the fact that many Lithuanian intellectuals – among whom Jonas Basanavičius, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas should be accorded pride of place – as well as ordinary people had sympathy for Jews, they and other aliens were excluded from the Lithuanian cultural/intellectual mainstream. The specifically Lithuanian intelligentsia defined the nation as the embodiment of a historical-cultural project, rather than as empirically identifiable social reality. They also decided who would belong to it.

Yet in recent years a tiny minority of Lithuanian intellectuals have shown a genuine interest in Jewish history as well as a great sensitivity toward their Jewish fellow citizens. The establishment in 2000 of the House of Memory in Lithuania, which is a non-governmental institution inspired by the Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre in Britain and which includes a number of public figures, is therefore a hopeful sign for the future. A number of Lithuanian public intellectuals – for example the film critic Linas Vildžiūnas, the journalists Algimantas Čekuolis and Rimvydas Valatka, the educator Vytautas Toleikis, the Calvinist priest Tomas Šernas, the theatre critic Irena Veisaitė, and the journalist and film script writer Pranas Morkus, to name just a few – have consistently raised their voices against all manifestations of anti-Semitism in Lithuania and signify the arrival of a new epoch and also the emergence of a new moral culture in Lithuania.

It would be naïve to deny the fact that anti-Semitism is still persistent and strong in present-day Lithuania. Its ugly face tends to appear in the guise of the most simplistic and primitive versions of anti-Communism, or myriad conspiracy theories, and that new European disease of an overtly anti-Israeli stance that misrepresents Palestinian-Israeli conflict and attempts to delegitimise the State of Israel. Unfortunately, this disease has not bypassed Lithuania. At the same time, it would be inaccurate, if not unfair, to insist on the failure of modern Lithuanian politics and culture to face up to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Lithuania.

In the brightest pronouncements and literary works of Lithuanian émigrés, the Holocaust had become an inseparable part, not to say wound, of modern Lithuanian identity. After the Second World War, the Lithuanian émigré poet Algimantas Mackus depicted the tragic fate of a Jewish boy in a moving poem, while another Lithuanian émigré writer, Antanas Škėma, joined the theme of the Holocaust with his novel, *Izaokas*.³ Together with other liberal-minded émigré writers, scholars and artists, Mackus and Škėma belonged to *Santara-Šviesa* (Concord-Light), a liberal, secular-humanist Lithuanian cultural movement in the USA whose members initiated wide political and intellectual debates concerning the role of Lithuanian collaborators of the Nazis

³ For more on this issue, see RIMVYDAS SILJABORIS: *Perfection of Exile. Fourteen Contemporary Lithuanian Writers*, Norman/OK 1970.

in the Holocaust. They also opposed the poisonous rhetoric and astonishing insensitivity with which a number of conservative Lithuanian émigrés assessed the greatest tragedy of Lithuania.⁴

Out of this clash of sensibilities, came the remarkable and moving words of Vytautas Kavolis, an eminent émigré sociologist in the USA and a great intellectual influence in Lithuania after 1990. Kavolis wrote that we are all responsible for what happened to Lithuanian Jews in 1941 in the sense of our sharing the mode of discourse and the form of insensitivity, which inevitably led to the demonisation, exclusion and extermination of Lithuanian Jews.⁵

Aleksandras Shtromas, Kavolis's life-long friend and classmate in pre-war Kaunas, a close friend of Venclova, an eminent émigré political theorist and criminologist in Great Britain and the USA, was also a major figure in the context of Lithuanian-Jewish debates. He regarded the nations as moral actors of history and violently objected the group, nation and culture stereotyping. A Holocaust survivor perfectly aware of anti-Semitism in his native country and beyond, Shtromas was convinced that Germanophobia, Russophobia, Polonophobia, or Lithuanophobia are no better than Judophobia. The Rabbi Joseph Klein Lecture, "The Jewish and Gentile Experience of the Holocaust: A Personal Perspective", which Shtromas gave on 10 April 1989 at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, was one of his most provocative public performances ever, and made clear his standpoint that no nation has the right to indict and judge other nations as collective criminals, and that any contempt for countries where the Holocaust occurred tends to multiply and strengthen mutual hatred and demonisation. The propensity to demonise other nations and cultures, according to Shtromas, is the most painful trauma inflicted by the Second World War on many nations.⁶

The problem of the representation and misrepresentation of the Other becomes central in the most internationally acclaimed of Tomas Venclova's thoughtful and penetrating political essays, such as "Jews and Lithuanians", "Russians and Lithuanians", and "Poles and Lithuanians".⁷ In more than one way Venclova differs from inter-war Lithuanian intellectuals – such as the writers Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, or the philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis – who were sympathetic to the Jews and who em-

⁴ For more on the secular-humanist movement of Lithuanian émigrés and their strong opposition to anti-Semitism, see LEONIDAS DONSKIS: *Identity and Freedom. Mapping Nationalism and Social Criticism in Twentieth-Century Lithuania*, London – New York 2002.

⁵ Vytautas Kavolis was especially specific on this issue in his Lithuanian contributions. For more on his concept of moral guilt and responsibility in opposing moral cultures or clashing modern systems of moralisation, see VYTAUTAS KAVOLIS: *Moralizing Cultures*, Lanham/ML 1993.

⁶ See ALEKSANDRAS SHTROMAS: *Totalitarianism and the Prospects for World Order. Closing the Door on the Twentieth Century*, ed. by ROBERT FAULKNER and DANIEL J. MAHONEY, New York et al. 2003.

⁷ See VENCLOVA: *Forms of Hope* (cf. footnote 1).

pathised with Lithuanian Jews from a genuinely Christian standpoint. But he also differs from the post-war liberal-humanist element in Lithuanian émigré culture in the USA, such as the afore-mentioned poet Algimantas Mackus. For Venclova, the Holocaust and the martyrdom of Lithuanian Jewry are not only a matter of sympathetic understanding and compassion, but also the crucial question of Lithuania's present and future. Venclova conceives of the destruction of the Jewish community in Lithuania as the destruction of the civic and moral foundations of Lithuania. A sense of metaphysical guilt here clearly means a realisation that I am part of a tragic history, since I belong to the country where a catastrophe occurred; I share the language, historical memory and culture of the country that witnessed a crime against humanity.

Venclova's humanism manifests itself not only in his great sensitivity, but also in his rejection of rational and deterministic explanations of the Holocaust. Elsewhere he reminds us that every crime, like every act of heroism, contains a kind of "transcendental remainder", which powerfully resists all rational-action or rational-choice explanations. Ultimately, such explanations are worthless. Having stressed that the Kaunas pogroms contradict the entire Lithuanian historical tradition marked by religious and political tolerance toward Jews and by peaceful coexistence of both peoples, Venclova breaks all Lithuanian political and cultural taboos by touching upon the nerve of the story.

One of such taboos in Lithuanian history and historical memory is the role of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) in the 1941 uprising to restore Lithuania's independence and in the spread of anti-Semitic propaganda in Lithuania. In 1941, the provisional government of Lithuania started playing a complicated game with the Nazis, sincerely hoping to restore Lithuania's independence. The game, as Venclova notes, was doomed inexorably to failure. It is difficult to imagine something more dubious than choosing between Stalin and Hitler. Nobody can deny the fact that the provisional government was inspired by the LAF. And the point is that it was members of the LAF who launched anti-Semitic propaganda employing such pearls of the Nazi rhetoric as "the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy", "a plot of the Jewish bankers and communists", "the Jewish yoke and exploitation", and the like.⁸

This is not to say that the entire 1941 uprising should be regarded as an overture to the Holocaust. But its fallacies and grave mistakes have to be admitted. Venclova was the first to do this. In his articles, he openly challeng-

⁸ For instance, Venclova quotes from an editorial in *Naujoji Lietuva* [The New Lithuania], 4 July 1941: "The greatest enemy of Lithuania and other nations was and in some places remains a Jew [...] Today, as a result of the genius of Adolf Hitler [...] we are free from the Jewish yoke [...] A New Lithuania, after joining a New Europe of Adolf Hitler, must be clean from Jews [...] To exterminate the Jewry and Communism along with it is a primary task of the New Lithuania." See TOMAS VENCLOVA: A Fifth Year of Independence. Lithuania, 1922 and 1994, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 9 (1995), 2, pp. 344-367, here p. 365.

ed the romanticised and patriotic version of the history of the Second World War, which tends to glamorise both the LAF and the 1941 uprising, and thus called for a transvaluation of those values. Quoting from editorials in wartime Lithuanian papers, Venclova showed black on white that some Lithuanian politicians and intellectuals, not to mention ordinary citizens, were deeply influenced by Nazism. What happened next was quite easy to expect – conservative and ultrapatriotic circles, particularly amongst émigrés, reacted noisily, thus adding insult to injury.

Even so, it seems there is a long way from propaganda, however ferocious and sinister, to mass murder. Yet Venclova places his interpretative emphasis and moral evaluation on the empirically elusive world of human connection and inter-subjectivity, rather than political history written in a conventional academic manner. In a world of moral choices and ethical self-fulfilment, nothing is unimportant, and every single detail of human experience or attitude acquires its meaning.

Being much in tune with Shtromas's idea that many tragic events of the 20th century have resulted from the division of people into "us" and "them", Venclova comes to stress spiritual isolation, which manifests itself in the division of people into categories. By distancing ourselves from a group of other human beings or our fellow citizens, we create a kind of political and moral vacuum, which sooner or later will be filled with theories and practices of exclusion and hatred – one more political and ethical message of Venclova's theory of otherness, dialogue and inter-subjectivity.⁹

Having lost the Litvaks, Lithuania lost a significant part of its identity and its self. It is through the moral integrity and scholarly dedication of the younger generation of Lithuanian historians, their well-documented research, and the courageous and timely social critique from some public intellectuals that Lithuania gradually comes to understand that the immensely rich and unique culture of Litvaks was, and continues to be, an inescapable part of its history, collective self, and political and moral existence.

Lithuania cannot become a modern actor of history without coming to terms with its painful history, and without realising that the way in which we discuss the Holocaust and deal with anti-Semitism tells everything about our ability to be modern human beings with powers of critical self-questioning, compassion and sympathetic understanding, instead of morons in a moral and political sense. The reflection on these major political issues and moral dilemmas could and should contribute to awareness of what it means to be a human being in the 21st century world.

⁹ See IDEM: *Forms of Hope* (cf. footnote 1).