

THE MEMORY OF THE HOLOCAUST AND THE WORLD WAR II IN LITHUANIA

Conflicting Memories: Jews, Lithuanians and the Holocaust

The Holocaust is one of the darkest pages in the history of Lithuania. According to the International Commission for the evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, the estimate number of victims of the Holocaust in Lithuania was between 200,000 and 206,000 and only about 9,000 Lithuanian Jews survived the war¹. The Responsible Agencies were not only the German Administration, but also Lithuanian Self-Defense Battalions, the Police Department, the Lithuanian Security Police, civilian administration. The peculiarity of the Holocaust in Lithuania is not only the speed and the scale, but also the fact, that perpetrators who were directly and non-directly involved in the genocide known their victims very well, they lived closely to each other, they were neighbors, as Jan T. Gross would say.

Today the Massacre of the Lithuanian Jews is well documented, thanks to Lithuanian historians, researchers from abroad, as well to the International Commission, which makes not only new research, but also organize various seminars for educators. However, the memory of the World War II and the Holocaust in Lithuania confronts with difficulties, which are rooted and related with the war and occupation experience. In order to understand these difficulties and to answer the question why it is so hard for the society to understand the Holocaust, we should also pay attention to the whole picture of the World War II in Lithuania and to the fact, that Lithuania (as well as Poland and other Baltic States) was occupied two times. Each of these occupations created new reality not only for Lithuania as a State, but also changed the relations between the Lithuanians, Jews and other minorities.

The U. S. historian Timothy Snyder in his latest book says, that the first Soviet occupation created material, political and psychological conditions for the Germans before they invaded these lands, so Lithuania too². It should be noted that these conditions were used not only by the German propaganda, but also by the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), created in Berlin, in 1940 by the politician, diplomat Kazys Škirpa. LAF organized anti-Soviet underground movement in occupied Lithuania and wanted to recreate the Independence with the Germans help. However, the attitudes of the Lithuanian Activist Front was anti-Semitic. The LAF documentation shows us that they encouraged Lithuanians fighters “to get rid with Jews when the war will start” or blamed Jews for collaboration with Soviets etc. It should be

¹ Dieckmann, Ch., Sužiedėlis. *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941*. Vilnius, 2006, p. 278-279.

² Snyder, T. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*. New York, 2015, p. 127.

noted that Jews suffered from the Soviet occupation at the same scale as Lithuanians. For example, among deportees, who were deported on 14th June, 1941 one week before German invasion started, were 71,6% Lithuanians and 12,5% Jews³. Jews also suffered from the Soviet policy of nationalization and religious regulations.

When Germany entered the war with Soviet Union, Nazis used these conditions in Lithuania, especially during the first weeks of the war. The collaboration of some Jews with the Soviets was not the condition for the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews, however many perpetrators took this condition as their motivation and rationalization for participation in genocide. Today Lithuanian historians discuss, how many Lithuanians were directly involved in the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews. The estimate number now is between 6,000 and 10,000.

When the Red Army re-entered the Lithuania in 1944 and the Second World War ended, the next wave of repressions took place in Lithuania. The estimate number of deportees, who were deported between 1944 and 1953 is 250,000, around 34,000 died during the Partisan war in Lithuania⁴. That is why the Western narrative on the positive role of the Soviet Union has little resonance in Lithuania and other Baltic States.

As it was described, the Holocaust took place in Lithuania between two Soviet occupations. That is the reason why it is so difficult for some part of society to understand that not only Lithuanians suffered during the Second World War but also Lithuanian Jews. It also the reason why it is so difficult for the society to accept the fact that the same person was not only the victim or the hero of the anti-Soviet fights, but also a perpetrator during the Nazi occupation.

For example, Juozas Krištaponis was Lithuanian military officer and participated in the Postwar partisan fights against the Soviets in Lithuania. Today there is square and monument named by his name in Ukmergė. However, during the Nazi occupation he was a member and leader of one of the Self-Defence Battalions and participated in the Massacre of Jews in Belarus. Another example is general Jonas Noreika. He actively participated both in anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet underground. However, at the beginning of the Nazi occupation, he was a head of Šiauliai region and on 22nd August 1941, signed the order to establish the Ghetto in Žagarė. Today there is a memory plate on the Library of Science in Vilnius for him. These two examples show that there is a dis-integrity towards assessment of these people. The heroic past of these people is remembered while at the same time there is not enough attention to the dark part of their biographies.

³ *Lietuva 1940-1990: Okupuotos Lietuvos istorija*. Vilnius, 2007, p. 142.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 397.

Another example is a book “Our Owns” (“Mūsiškiai”) written by publicist Rūta Vanagaitė. The book contains a lot of extracts from published and archival resources about the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews and also raised the questions about the Lithuanians who participated in it. All this documentation is very shocking and when the book appeared at the beginning of this year, caused huge debate about the Holocaust in Lithuania. One part of the society welcomed the book, while another side was angry and against it. Even some officials said that this book discredits the history of Lithuania and can be used by the enemies of the State.

These examples show us that today nobody denies the fact that the Holocaust took place in Lithuania and some Lithuanians participated in genocide. However, for the part of society the Holocaust is still the question about which is too hard to think and talk openly.

Narratives in Lithuanian Historiography

The Second World War and the Soviet occupation experience is not the only reason, why it is hard for the society to speak about the Holocaust openly. Another factor of this problem is that there was no tradition to rethink and to speak about that for a long time. Only after Lithuania regained the Independence the true dialogue and discussion about the difficult past could be initiated.

During the Soviet occupation there were a lot of publications about the World War II and the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews, however, the uniqueness of the Holocaust was not emphasized. The Remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust was represented ideologically while the documentation was published with the selectivity. The Jewish Museum created in 1944 in Vilnius, the only one such museum in the whole Soviet Union, was closed in 1949. The Narrative of Great Patriotic War under the leadership of Russian nation was presented while the victims of the Holocaust were camouflaged as the murder of “peaceful Soviet citizens”. The same name was used also in such places like Paneriai or IX fort. It should be noted, that this narrative was quite comfortable for Lithuanians, who lived in occupied Lithuania and who did not want to remember or to speak about difficult War experience and openly answer the question where their neighbors had disappeared⁵.

Meanwhile among the Lithuanian emigrants in the West the World War II and the Holocaust was discussed, however, this discussion was followed in the defensive mood. Nobody denied the fact the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews took place in Lithuania, however, this discussion was recreated using the myths and stereotypes about Jews collaboration during

⁵ Vitkus, H. Holokausto atminties problema ir jos poveikis lietuvių ir žydų santykiams, in: Verbickienė, J. (Ed.). *Abipusis pažinimas: lietuvių ir žydų kultūriniai saitai*. Vilnius, 2010, p. 299.

the first Soviet occupation, especially among the older generation of Lithuanians. Mainly this discussion had the same features: Lithuanians did not collaborate with Nazis, all Lithuanians were friendly with Jews and tried to help them etc. Regarding the motivation of collaboration with Nazis and participation in the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews was used “double genocide” theory. That means that some part of society collaborated with Nazis, because some Jews collaborated with the Soviets before. This was a false image of the events which took place in Lithuania, however this “theory” was cultivated at large in the whole generation of Lithuanians emigrants⁶.

There was also examples of “whitening” the history. Kazys Škirpa in the U. S. published a book “Revolt” (“Sukilimas”), where he put all documentation about the Lithuanian Activist Front, described his relations with the Germans, his views about the policy in the occupied Lithuania. As it was already mentioned, some part of documentation was highly anti-Semitic, but all these parts were deleted from the book⁷.

The last illustration is that each year Lithuanian emigrants who lived in the West commemorated and remembered victims of the Soviet regime. On the other hand, there was no such commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust, that is why relations between the older generation of Lithuanian emigrants and survivors of the Holocaust were very complicated.

These examples illustrate the attitudes towards the Second World War and the Holocaust among the older generation. However, these are not the only ones. Starting the 80s Lithuanian intellectuals among the liberal circles in the West started to raise the question to the older generation. The main topic of this discussion was the collaboration and guilty. One of the main voices of this discussion was Lithuanian poet and scholar, Tomas Venclova, who published an article “Jews and Lithuanians” in 1975⁸. This article could be called as a manifest, because he raised the questions about Lithuanians guilty and asked to stop searching the faults made by others and to try to speak about the difficult past openly.

As it was already mentioned the open discussion started only after Lithuania reestablished the Independence, on the other hand, the myths and stereotypes already mentioned are still alive among society. There are a lot of documentation and material already published, however the whole picture of the Holocaust in Lithuania are not composed yet and both the historians and the society have a lot of to do.

Regarding the future prospects Lithuanian historian Saulius Sužiedėlis, one of the major historians who is writing about the Holocaust, underlines three conditions, under which

⁶ For Ex.: Prunskis, J. *Lithuania's Jews and the Holocaust*. Chicago, 1979.

⁷ Škirpa, K. *Sukilimas Lietuvos suverenumui atstatyti: dokumentinė apžvalga*. Washington, D. C., 1973.

⁸ Venclova, T. Žydai ir lietuviai, in: Venclova, T. *Vilties formos*. Vilnius, 1991, p. 130-138.

the education and research about the Holocaust would be strengthen: 1) recognition of Jewish life and culture as internal part of Lithuania's past; 2) the acceptance and commemoration of the Holocaust as a central event in the modern history of Lithuania; 3) examination of the behavior of the Lithuanian people during the destruction of the Jews⁹. All these three condition are not fully implemented in the history of Lithuania yet.

Remembrance of Auschwitz in Lithuania

Auschwitz is the major place of the extermination of the European Jews and the symbol of human evil. Each year Lithuania, as the other countries, commemorates the day of Liberation of Auschwitz on 27th January. During that day various activities is taking place, especially at schools. Mass media also gives attention to that date: various articles about this camp appears on the websites, TV channels broadcasts documentaries. However, Lithuania has two dates related with the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust. Another date is Lithuanian Jews Genocide day on 23rd September. It commemorates not only the date of Destruction of the Vilnius Ghetto but also all victims of the Holocaust in Lithuania. During that day in various places people are reading the names of the victims of the Holocaust. This initiative organized by Lithuanian NGOs is called "The Names".

There are also translated memoirs and books about this camp in Lithuanian language, for example Primo Levi's book. However, the history of Auschwitz is much more reflected in the Lithuanian mass media, than by the Lithuanian historians. The main reason for this is not that Lithuanian historians mostly focus on the local history, but the difference of Nazi occupation policy in Lithuania like in other territories of the former Soviet Union.

There was no transitional period between the implementation of power at the beginning of Nazi occupation and the Massacre of Lithuanian Jews. The Massive Massacre started at the same day when German army entered Lithuania. Most of the Lithuanian Jews were killed in the summer and autumn 1941 in the places where they lived and only after that Ghettos in Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai were created. The estimate number of the victims who were killed between August and December 1941 is about 130,000-140,000¹⁰.

There are places in Lithuania like Paneriai or IX fort in Kaunas, where thousands of Jews were killed and these places are well known around all the World, but the number of such places in Lithuania is much higher. There are 227 sites of the Massacre in the whole Lithuania. We should not compare these places but all these places like Auschwitz or Paneriai

⁹ Sužiedėlis, S., Liekis, Š. *Conflicting Memories: The Reception of the Holocaust in Lithuania*, in: Himka, J. P., Michlic, J. B. (Eds.). *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*. Lincoln, London, 2013, p. 344.

¹⁰ Dieckmann, Ch., Sužiedėlis. *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941*. Vilnius, 2006, p. 279.

remember us what happened and how we should behave that such horrible events will never happen again.