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Holocaust Memory and Antisemitism in Lithuania: Reversed Memories of the Second World War

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1 Introduction

For many years Lithuanian Holocaust remembrance was carried out by the small Lithuanian-Jewish community. This community represents a very small minority because, during the Holocaust in Lithuania, 250,000 Jews were killed, namely, 95% all the Lithuanian Jewry. After the Holocaust there remained only around 5,000 Lithuanian Jews, most of whom eventually emigrated from the country. Many Jews who survived the war, especially those (re)located in the Western allied zones, did not return to Lithuania. The Lithuanian Jews who emigrated created Jewish organizations and Landmannschaften and transferred their culture to other parts of the world. The German cultural historian Prof. Anna Lipphardt has already written a transnational history of relationships of Vilna Jews after the Holocaust, a history that connects New York, Tel Aviv and Vilnius.¹ In my own dissertation I also focus on the Lithuanian Jewish diaspora and their documentary filmmaking as a certain form of dealing with the past.² The Holocaust memory in Lithuania today remains the memory of the minority, fostered mainly by different forms of the diasporic remembrance and the small Lithuanian-Jewish community, which is sporadically supported by the Lithuanian state especially during the commemorative events and rituals.

For instance, this year in Lithuania is marked not only by the Lithuanian presidency in the European Union, but has also been named as the Year of Remembrance of the Vilna Ghetto. A commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto was held at different state institutions, including the Lithuanian Parliament and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also travelled to other countries, including Germany, where the conference on the Jewish Vilna was held at the end of October. This was not solely an academic discussion, but also included political rhetoric in the form of words of welcome and presentations given by the Lithuanian Minister of Culture and the Mayor of Vilnius. All these recent events show a very strong and growing interest of the Lithuanian political institutions and their actors in the commemoration of the Holocaust, which without doubt is related to the politics of memory. The formation of a new Holocaust memory culture of remembrance is aimed at improving the Lithuanian image in the Western world, which in recent decades has been damaged by certain forms of antisemitism, in some cases even evoked by the Lithuanian state.

¹ Lipphardt, Anna (2006): *Vilne. Die Juden aus Vilnius nach dem Holocaust. Eine transnationale Beziehungsgeschichte*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.

² Provisional title: *Media Memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania after 1990*, Humboldt University of Berlin.

In this presentation, I briefly present the Lithuanian landscape of the Holocaust memory and the forms of antisemitism that still prevail. First, I answer the question why certain forms of antisemitism have emerged in Lithuania, thereby focussing on the Lithuanian double memory of the Second World War, history writing, nation-state building and controversial heroes of the anti-Soviet resistance. Then I present the case of antisemitism, where in Lithuania Holocaust victims were turned into perpetrators. I discuss one of the most difficult and complex issues of the Lithuanian memory of the Second World War, namely, the Jewish resistance. The debate surrounding the memory of Jewish resistance allows us to discuss not only two different cultures of remembrance, including the Soviet memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania and the new post-Soviet culture of memory, but also reveals the important role of Lithuanian media in shaping the Holocaust memory.

2 Reversed Memory of the Second World War: From Antisemitic “Heroes” to Jewish “Perpetrators”?

2.1. History Writing, Nation-State Building and Antisemitic “Heroism”

The construction of memories was one of the most significant processes in Lithuania after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Different memory groups were unified by the idea of building a nation-state. The memories of the Soviet occupation, which had been suppressed during the Cold War, were now decolonized, and a national memory of the Second World War emerged. However, the Soviet regime left its legacies. Lithuanian history was written through the perspective of one nation, which evoked new forms of colonisation. The Holocaust that occurred in Lithuania was marginalized.

In Lithuania, after independence, in many families the history of the Stalinist deportations and resistance against the Soviet violence were the dominant memories that connected not only different generations, but also diverse communities of memories, from the political prisoners, partisans, anti-Communist resistance to the former Communists. In the meantime, the Holocaust atrocities were summarily forgotten, as it did not fit the framework of the Lithuanian nationhood and its redefined national identity. Private memories, which had been deprived and frozen during the Soviet regime, not only thawed, but also became a cornerstone of the nation-state building process. The “community of suffering”³ was created.

The memory of Stalinist repression during the years of the national upheaval turned into “the state-supported remembrance of a ‘Soviet genocide’”.⁴ Lithuania became the only country to broaden the definition of genocide in its penal code and

³ Budrytė, Dovilė: Integration or Exclusion? Historical Memory and State Building in the Baltic States, 3rd EUSTORY Conference, 7-9 March 2003, Budapest, pp. 1-5, here p. 2, in: [eustory.de](http://www.eustory.de), http://www.eustory.de/root/img/pool/bilder_fuer_conferences/pdf/Bydryte_paper.pdf, accessed 10 May 2012.

⁴ Budrytė, Dovilė: “We call it genocide”: Soviet Deportations and Repression in the Memory of Lithuanians, in: Frey, Robert Seitz (ed.): *The Genocidal Temptation: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda and Beyond*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004, pp. 79-100, here 79.

to define the Soviet crimes against Lithuanian citizens as genocidal violence.⁵ Professor of Political Science Dovile Budryte remarks that during the years of the national revival the genocide paradigm and the paradigm of „fighting and suffering“ became the most popular interpretations of the past, later to be transformed into the institutionalized history of the country.⁶ In addition, cinematic memories and visualizations of the partisan fight and „Lithuanian suffering“ have also appeared in documentary and cinema films.⁷

In the Lithuanian *Geschichtsschreibung* they were idealized and perceived as fighters-idealists who „contributed to the common fight for the ideals of freedom and humanity“.⁸ Any debate over their possible perpetratorhood and collaboration was avoided. As Lithuanian historian Egidijus Aleksandravicius observes, “the shame of collaboration was often included in the price of freedom”, and in Lithuania there was always a tension between collaboration and resistance.⁹ Such an interpretation of the past is also echoed by Suziedelis, who claims that Lithuanian pro-German orientation was fostered by the anti-Stalinist resistance and was part of the new Lithuanian nationalism.¹⁰ This new nationalism, on the one hand, embraced “Christian ethics”, supported the Church and emphasized the ideas of a peaceful “New Europe” in which the small nations were an important element.¹¹ On the other hand, it adhered not only to fascist, authoritarian ideas and encouraged antisemitic stance towards the Lithuanian Jews. Collaboration in Lithuania occurred on two levels: the discursive, expressed through the ideological positions of the right-extremist thinkers, the Provisional Government and the Lithuanian Activist Front; and the actual, embodied in the active participation in the killings of the Jews, carried out by the Lithuanian police battalions, paramilitary forces and

5 Žilinskas, Justinas: Genocidas – sąvokos traktuotė Lietuvoje ir užsienyje, in: Genocidas ir Rezistencija, 2001, (Vol. 2), No. 10., pp. 109-115.

6 Budrytė, Dovilė: “We call it genocide“: Soviet Deportations and Repression in the Memory of Lithuanians, in: Frey, Robert Seitz (ed.): The Genocidal Temptation: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda and Beyond, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004, pp. 79-100, here 88.

7 The most prominent Lithuanian films on the Soviet occupation are the following. Cinema films: Mėnulio Lietuva (Lunar Lithuania, LT 1997; dir: Gytis Lukšas); Vienui Vieni (Utterly Alone, LT 2004; dir: Jonas Vaitkus); Kai aš buvau partizanas (When I Was a Partisan, LT 2008; dir: Vytautas V. Landsbergis). Documentary films (selected): Karlagas mirties žemė (Karlag Is My Land, LT 1990; dir: Vitalis Gruodis); Šiaurės Golgota (The Golgotha of the North, LT 1991; dir: Romualdas Šliažas); Sibiro Lietuva (The Lithuania of Siberia, LT 1993; dir: Petras Abukevičius / Vytautas Damaševičius); Birželio ledas (The Ice of June, LT 2001; dir: Raimundas Kaminskas); Važiuojam iš ukvatos (We are going from ukvat, LT 2006; dir: Gintautas Alekna); Gyveno senelis ir bobutė (Once Live Grandfather and Grandmother, LT 2007; dir: Giedrė Beinoriūtė); Sibiro testamentas (The Testament of Siberia, LT 2008; dir: Gintaras Makarevičius); Partizanai (Partisans, LT 1993; dir: Edmundas Zubavičius); Partizanės (Partisan Women, LT 1995; dir: Edmundas Zubavičius); Ketvirtasis prezidentas (The Fourth President, LT 1995; dir: Juozas Sabolius, Eugenijus Ignatavičius); Karas po karo (War After War, LT 1998; dir: Edmundas Zubavičius); Ginkluotas pasipriešinimas (Armed Resistance, LT 1999; dir: Aleksandras Digimas).

8 Kuodytė, Dalia / Tracevskis, Rokas: The Unknown War: Armed anti-Soviet Resistance in Lithuania in 1944-1953, Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2006, p. 50.

9 Aleksandravicius, Egidijus (2006): “Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazis and the Soviets”, in: Tauber, Joachim (ed.): “Kollaboration” in Nordosteuropa. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen im 20. Jahrhundert, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, p. 174.

10 Sužiedėlis, Saulius (2004): “Foreign Saviors, Native Disciples: Perspectives”, in: Gaunt, David, Levine, Paul A. and Palosuo, Laura (eds.): Collaboration and Resistance During the Holocaust. Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bern: Peter Lang AG, p. 333.

11 Ibid, p. 335.

ordinary citizens, the so-called neighbors. Such historical events as the anti-Soviet uprising in 1941, which marked the victory against the Soviets as well as the beginning of the Holocaust, serve as good examples of the ambivalence of Lithuanian history. It also reveals that some of the Lithuanian heroes of the Second World War and anti-Soviet resistance have double biographies, namely, they could be depicted not only as freedom fighters, but also as antisemites or even collaborators with the NS regime.

2.2. Legacies of the Soviet Memory, Jewish Resistance and “Perpetratorhood”

During the Second World War, there was not only anti-Soviet but also anti-NS resistance, carried out mainly by the Lithuanian Jews in the ghettos and nearby forests. Lithuania Jewish resistance was both spiritual and armed in nature, and among them were not only such famous male partisan fighters as Abba Kovner, Itzik Vitenberg or Yitzhak Arad, who joined the Soviet partisans, but also female partisans, for instance, in Kovno Sara Ginaite, in Vilnius Rachel Margolis and Fania Brancovskaya. In the Soviet times, most of those partisans, in the main non-Zionists, were named “Heroes of War” after the Second World War and became visible in the Soviet books dealing with partisan resistance. Of course, their iconographies and narratives were not part of the Jewish history and resistance, but rather turned into the ideologised Soviet history of Soviet people. They were partisans who fought against the NS regime, whose Jewish identity was simply overshadowed by the Soviet.

However, in Lithuania, the winners of the Second World War were also always seen as the occupiers of the country. In the Lithuanian historical narrative the end of war marks not a victory, but on the contrary is the official beginning of the Lithuanian occupation by the Soviet Russia. It means that all pro-Soviet heroes in the Lithuanian historical context were seen as anti-heroes who collaborated with the Soviets and welcomed the occupation. As Leiserowitz remarks, “the group pictures of the veterans and their appearances at anniversary event were component of a collective memory in the LiSSR and were looked on by the Lithuanians as an expression of the Soviet culture of occupation.”¹² This memory of cultural occupation did not disappear after independence and today also influences the remembrance of the Holocaust and its victims.

In 2007 and 2008 four Lithuanian Jewish partisans, namely, Rachel Margolis, Sara Ginaite, Fania Brancovskaya and Yitzhak Arad, the former director of Yad Vashem, were suspected by the Lithuanian State prosecutors of having committed war crimes during their resistance fight. In this manner, Holocaust victims were transformed into perpetrators. Such accusations could also be seen as a certain form of legitimization of the antisemitism that caused the Holocaust during the war in Lithuania. These partisans were accused of serving in the NKVD and of

¹² Leiserowitz, Ruth (2012): *In the Lithuanian Woods. Jewish and Lithuanian Female Partisans*, in: Röger, Maren and Ruth Leiserowitz (2012): *Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, Osnabrück: Fibre, 217.

being involved in executions of Lithuanian civilians. The allegations were primarily based on the memoirs of Arad and Margolis. These prosecutions were later rejected as not having enough evidence. In the Lithuanian media, however, these partisans were called terrorists and murderers. This investigation also attracted the attention of diverse international media. For instance, even the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Gordon Brown wrote an article in 2011 which was published in *The Independent*. He defended Rachel Margolis and other Jewish partisans, blaming Lithuanian state for the antisemitic campaign against the Holocaust victims and revealing local press hostility towards the Jewish history of the country.¹³ This case reveals how unstable Lithuanian politics of memory is. First, some of these partisans already in independent Lithuania had been honored for their activities as anti-Nazi partisans by the Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas. Then they were accused of war crimes and now after 5 years again recognized as victims. For instance, Fania Brancovskaya was a speaker during many commemorative events in 2013 and was honored again by the Lithuanian President.

3 Conclusions

In summary, the perception of the Second World War and its memorialisation in Lithuania has been reversed, as antisemitic actors of the anti-Soviet resistance were turned to the heroes of Lithuanian history and Jewish victims and members of resistance, once legitimized by the Soviet authorities, were seen as possible perpetrators. This reversion of memory might be explained by the fact that during the years of the Soviet occupation, when the memory of Holocaust globally emerged, these states were occupied and culturally and politically colonized by the Soviet Union. The Holocaust as the site of memory was effectively deleted from collective memory. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Holocaust memory became overshadowed by the emergence of the memory of the Stalinist crimes and by the evaluation and remembrance of the Communist past. "A victim narrative" was chosen as a much more comfortable version of Lithuanian history for the 20th century, and in the meantime collaboration with the NS, Holocaust victims and the Lithuanian-Jewish history long remained solely the separate memory of the Lithuanian Jewish community and was seen as non-Lithuanian part of history. The Head of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum and Jewish writer and publicist, Markas Zingeris, stated in the closing speech during the Vilna Conference in Berlin, in Lithuania today the law on reparations is passed, interest on the part of the state has grown, but what is still lacking - what is still in progress - is the inclusion of the Jewish narrative in the Lithuanian history writing.

¹³ Brown, Gordon (2011): Women of Courage: Rachel Margolis, in: *The Independent*, taken from the online edition: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/women-of-courage-rachel-margolis-2236081.html> (accessed May 10, 2013).

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