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HISTORY SECTION

Egidijus Aleksandravičius: “By reburying Brazaitis, we wanted to show that the Lithuanian drama hasn’t ended yet.”

by Valdas Bartasevičius (Lietuvos rytas)

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The mortal remains of the controversial head of the Lithuanian Provisional Government, Juozas Brazaitis, were flown from the United States to Lithuania and reburied Sunday in Kaunas.

The ceremony for the reburial of Brazaitis gave rise to protests by Jews who judge negatively the activities of the Provisional Government of 1941, which published antisemitic statements.

This led to the decision by Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) not to allow a conference on Brazaitis which had been planned there.

“Are Jews justified in being angered by the idea of honoring Brazaitis by reburying his remains in his homeland?” *Lietuvos Rytas* asked Egidijus Aleksandravičius, a VMU professor and director of the Exile [“Émigré”] Studies Center.

“I feel down to my bones the tension that has been caused by the reburial of Brazaitis and aspirations to monumentalize his memory.

“This is caused by the disconnect in the memory of Lithuanians and Jews.

“By reburying Brazaitis, we wanted to show that the drama of Lithuanians hasn’t ended yet. All of our heroes who during that tragic period of history attempted to raise the flag of Lithuanian independence were forced into compromises with stronger powers. This is what enables people to portray them in terms of the great evil of those times.

“The Holocaust is and will remain at the center of the memory of Lithuanians, even if we try to avoid talking about it in all sorts of ways. Lithuanians and Jews need to learn to understand better the memory of one another.

“I understand the reaction of Jews which is based on a simplified, schematic look at the Lithuanian provisional government. But you can’t tear its antisemitic statements out of history.”

“But Brazaitis told in his memoirs about how he tried to even oppose the wave of antisemitism.”

“Those memoirs were written after World War II, in emigration, so they are only a secondary source of information.

“But the later activity of Brazaitis showed that he was no antisemite. He didn’t even enter into compromises with the Nazis to the extent that Lithuanian Activist Founder Kazys Škirpa did.

“I only see the drama of a person who was not able to foresee that it was dangerous to enter even into oral compromises with the great powers of evil for the sake of the ideals of Lithuanian freedom.

“This was an extraordinarily cultured person, but the cataclysms of history fated him to become the head of a government that had no power, in whose documents it is possible to come across inscriptions that violate principles of humanitarianism.”

“Perhaps it should have been stressed primarily that the person being reburied was an individual who sought an exit from the complex plight of history, rather than the head of a government?”

“Truly it should be stressed that at that time we did not have a state which was capable of protecting its citizens even minimally. One can see a certain contradiction: the Provisional Government issued a declaration of independence, and in so doing seemingly also declared that the state of Lithuania was being restored, but in fact it had no power whatsoever.

“In reburying our figures from the past, we can better understand the historical fate of the lands of Lithuania when there are several strata of blood. It is as if our right to have heroes who could be judged simply as heroes has been taken away from us.

“We are not unique in this respect. The Ukrainians, for example, built a monument to Stepan Bandera, who fought against the Nazis and fought against the Soviets, but he was involved in the mass murder of Jews and Poles.

“Of course, it is impossible to compare Bandera to Brazaitis, who was a real intellectual and did nothing bad to anyone personally. He merely led the government which issued the declaration, but which didn’t control the territory and was not able to stop the mass murders committed there.”

“But it seems Jewish organizations aren’t really predisposed to looking further into these complex nuances of Lithuanian history.”

“Who wants to look deeper when so much blood has been shed! The words of historians are very important, but they aren’t omnipotent.

“It’s great that there are historians such as Timothy Snyder who is helping the West to comprehend what happened here.

“And we ourselves lack an understanding of history, we don’t understand how people of the world who suffered horribly are able to judge our actions. We only see our own traumas and don’t see the suffering of others.

“We speak different languages and are recounting stories that have no connection. Learning to engage in dialogue is needed.”

“Do we perhaps need more conferences of the sort that was planned for discussing the legacy of Brazaitis at VMU but which was cancelled by the university leadership?”

“This wasn’t the academic community but a decision of the VMU administration which became frightened that they were going to get hit over the head with a club by the Jews.

“Government representatives acted similarly: at first they financed the reburial ceremony, but later became afraid and ignored it.”