

NOTE: The following is a draft translation of LRT's 24 January television interview with Faina Kukliansky chairperson of the (state-sponsored) Lithuanian Jewish Community. For the response from the Vilnius Jewish Community, see Prof. Josif Parasonis's article, "On Representation and Morality: Thoughts on Recent TV Interview with the Nominal Chairperson of the Lithuanian Jewish Community" in *Defending History* (4 March 2020), a translation of his Lithuanian original that appeared on LRT's website on 27 February, and was quickly confirmed as being the position of the Vilnius Jewish Community on its Facebook page.

A Different Kind of Conversation with Edvardas Žičkus

Edvardas Žičkus: Good evening. As usual, "A Different Conversation with Edvardas Žičkus" says hi to you on a Friday evening on "Lietuvos Rytas" TV. And tonight I'm accompanied by Chairwoman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, former Militsiya interrogator and prosecutor, lawyer Faina Kukliansky.

[vignette]

EŽ: A sharp conversation with Chairwoman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community Faina Kukliansky.

Faina Kukliansky: He told me: "You're a kike. And Lithuania is no place for your kind."

EŽ: From the unbelievably sensitive family history to unexpected backstabs from her own comrades.

FK: Everybody thinks I'm some sort of authoritarian dragon.

[vignette]

EŽ: Good evening, Faina.

FK: Good evening.

EŽ: Let's start with the fact that this year has been designated the Year of the Vilna Gaon and Lithuanian Jews, hasn't it? What does this mean to both Jews and other Lithuanians? What does it mean to all of us?

FK: Well, you know the thing with a glass half-filled with water. There are both good and bad sides to this. That people are separated into species, races, etc.: this annoys me sometimes. On the other hand, indeed, people are of different species, subspecies, etc. A Jew is one of the subspecies. We weren't too amused by the Year of Jews. Must be because I still remember, in

the Soviet times, there used to be one day in a week that would be the Day of Fish. So that's one of the associations for me, that this year is dedicated to Jews. However, if we take into account the broader society, which isn't too acquainted with the Jewish culture, Jewish life, and in general not many people know anything about Jews in Lithuania, perhaps it's not such a bad idea. The Gaon is a different topic, he is a part of interpretations of Judaism and both his commentary and he as a person are very interesting. He was a man who studied not only Judaism but a whole range of various other disciplines, too: higher mathematics, chemistry, etc. So it's a good thing that people will get to know more about the Gaon and Jews who've been living in Lithuania for the past six centuries. So we'll try to do everything that's in our power to make this material as accessible and as understandable as possible. Because quite recently I had a strange encounter in the Seimas on January 13, I was invited, just like every other year, to the commemoration event, and after the event, in between the commemoration itself and the flag-raising, there is usually a little break during which people can talk to each other. An elderly person in a uniform approached me in the corridor and told me that I am contaminating Lithuania. He walked away, then came back and told me: "You're a kike. And Lithuania is no place for your kind." To be honest, I didn't know how to respond, since I hadn't heard things like that for a while. So. But people were standing all around us and they must've heard it, but no one...

EŽ: No one reacted, no one reproached him?

FK: No one reacted, and even I, despite having quite a good weapon in my hands...

EŽ: You mean the plaster cast?

FK: The plaster cast. But I wouldn't get into a fight in the Seimas, would I? So, in my opinion, the society, young people have a different attitude to these species and subspecies of people, and perhaps young people will get some new information from this year, perhaps it'll benefit them more, whereas these people who see me as a kike that has no place in Lithuania... To be honest, I don't really need their permission to live in Lithuania. It wasn't them who brought me here and it won't be them who'll make me leave this place.

EŽ: But look, I won't repeat the word that you said, and you said that it is, indeed, an insult, isn't it? Could we then perhaps start talking about the stereotypes that are still resilient in our society? What are the main things or incorrect clichés that the society kind of has in mind still, and sometimes perhaps a word like the one you mentioned can fly out of our mouths without us even thinking anything in the wrong context, can't it? So how should we, I don't know, arrange things for ourselves, what is not permissible and what we need to know before we talk to each other?

FK: OK. Your question already has the answer in it. Because you didn't say that word, after all.

EŽ: Because I understand that it's derogatory and that's why I wouldn't say it. But, I'm really sorry, but if I remember correctly, several years ago Prof. Vytautas Landsbergis, while talking about you...

FK: Not several years ago. Even a bit later.

EŽ: ...also said that word.

FK: Yes, he said it. It's clear that his... I'm not a psychologist, although I've spent time studying that field quite a lot, so, it seems to me that in the subconscious, these myths and that—perhaps “hatred” is too strong a word, but perhaps us, Jews, bring up unpleasant feelings in some people... That happens. And it's, in my opinion, a global problem, it's not only antisemitism that's a problem nowadays. Even more, nowadays, it's a problem without a problem, because there are no Jews in Lithuania. Not much remains of us...

EŽ: The current estimate is up to five thousand, right?

FK: We say five thousand, but it's quite difficult to come up with an exact number, what's clear is that it's really not the 250 thousand that used to live here, so fighting against Jews is really nonsensical nowadays, because it's a battle against the past, a battle against shadows. They can call me what they want, a kike or not a kike, I won't become someone else because of that. Life has moved on a lot and, in my opinion, Jews have integrated into this society, the Lithuanian society, so well that they don't even have any external distinctive features left. Before the War, you could see men with beards, you could see a lot of religious people who'd wear different clothes than secular people, and now it's a rare occasion that you'd see anything like that, and when we're talking about Jews, we're simply trying to remind everyone that they used to exist and that not all of them have gone extinct. But fighting the remaining existing Jews, insulting them, waging battles against them—it's a stupid thing to do. I, for one, am a strong opponent of the term “ethnic minority”, I'd call it a “more vulnerable social group”, because the history of Lithuania shows that this group was and is, to this day, more vulnerable than others. At least I think that the less the whole social environment, the society tries to see some distinctive features in different people, not that they... I don't know if they even exist. What can one say: that Jews are clever? And Lithuanian's aren't?

EŽ: Enterprising, too.

FK: Enterprise?

EŽ: Enterprising.

FK: Enterprising? And Lithuanian's aren't? You tell me, today, in our society, can you see how many young people are engaged in start-ups, how popular they are around the world, and, by the way, it's Lithuanians who do that, ethnic Lithuanians, not Jews? Perhaps we could say that there would've been many Einsteins among those who were killed, but people are people, with their own history, their traditions, their lives, and in today's Lithuania I wouldn't make such a big distinction between different ethnicities. All ethnicities, however many of them there are, have integrated into the Lithuanian society well enough.

EŽ: You know, Faina, here I am listening to you and thinking: in your view, where exactly does this separation express itself—this is *you*, and this is *us*?

FK: You know, I don't know where it came from. I don't know if it's good to be too honest here, but I can tell you something really honest.

EŽ: Please do.

FK: That the Jews hate the Lithuanians more than the Lithuanians hate the Jews.

[Coming up next]

FK: I got employed as a Militsiya officer. [*Russian*] “I serve the Soviet Union.” Horrible. Horrible. So horrible, I can’t even describe it.

EŽ: But is it true that at the time the Militsiya would have you investigate the most, say, unusual cases?

FK: Those were very hard times for me, there was a lot of work, two little kids, but it was all very interesting.

[Let’s meet again after this short commercial break]

EŽ: In your view, where exactly does this separation express itself—this is *you*, and this is *us*?

FK: You know, I don’t know where it came from. I don’t know if it’s good to be too honest here, but I can tell you something really honest.

EŽ: Please do.

FK: That the Jews hate the Lithuanians more than the Lithuanians hate the Jews. Yes. That’s just how it came to be. Every family has suffered to a certain extent. Suffered—I mean serious suffering, i.e., Jews were slaughtered. Jews were separated, the Holocaust, after all, is an exceptional thing, a distinguished case. I used to think that education must give one a better understanding of another human being, to understand them better... But now, reading the current book, I became disillusioned, and then that incident in the Seimas, and the Professor’s statement—education probably only gives a limited, a limited possibility to be... No, “tolerant” is not a good word. To respect the other as much as one’s own. And, of course, the things that happened during the War, the extermination of the community, especially during the first half of 1941, when all inhabitants of the townships, the so-called shtetls, were murdered, and they were murdered, obviously, by their neighbors—the perpetrators didn’t come from outer space or, say, Tunisia. So that stays for a long time and it’s the sort of memory that one simply can’t get rid of. When my parents were still alive, no one—or when my relatives were alive, all of them grew old and died, after all—no one would have us sit down and listen to lectures on what had happened during the War. But I, for one, I grew up in an environment in which talks, discussions about the War were an everyday topic, one way or another. And that seeps into you. As a person, I have completely no, no sentiment against Lithuanians or against Russians, I’m not a russophobe, I’m not, I absolutely, I absolutely don’t care and our family is a cosmopolitan family. But, since I’m the Chairwoman of the Community, I also know a little about the attitude of Jews around me and others. I can’t say that all Jews hate all Lithuanians, no, and it has never happened that we’d blame the whole ethnicity as such for something. But the sentiment of sorts, the sediment—it remains.

EŽ: Is there a way, in your opinion, to draw the line under this painful history of seven decades ago? Of course, these are the black pages of our history and we can't just tear them out, but can we make it so that we could continue living with this knowledge but without pain?

FK: I think there is a way. The pain, you see—you can't fix every person's heart. I can be hurt by the fact that my parents died, I can be hurt by someone who offended me, or someone who crossed the street in a wrong spot, or had my car wrecked, there has always been pain and there always will be. But let's take the case of Germany. The process there was also prolonged, but in the end it was completed. And then everyone stopped talking about it. That's it, it's done, we draw the line here. "We did it." There was an attempt here, at some point, when Brazauskas went on a visit to—when President Brazauskas went to Israel and apologized to the Jewish nation in its entirety. There's a photo remaining, him kissing [Jokūbas] Brošas, whom I know personally, he escaped, he managed to somehow climb out of the ditch in Paneriai and escape... And this could've been it, but then when Brazauskas came back, it seems to me, here he was attacked from all sides. And so it continued, continued, and continued, some sort of unclear discussion... You see, sometimes it seems to me that there's obviously the fact that the Jews are no longer here, it's an obvious fact that they were murdered. They're not here anymore. So we recognize the fact that they were murdered for the simple reason that they're not here anymore. But we can't or don't want to or it's simply not bon ton to talk about it. So I think that we need to finally draw that line, once and for all, and stop even discussing this topic.

EŽ: OK, so perhaps now we can go on to other stories, right? You told me that you grew up in the center of Vilnius, right? Your family was indeed large, you had nine cousins, whom you would call your brothers and sisters. This truly special relationship, I don't know, does it exist in all Jewish families or only in yours?

FK: I don't know, they are truly brothers and sisters to me. Our family was very—I can't remember any feuds at all. All those who'd marry into our family would become its rightful and equal members. At first I lived on Subačiaus Street, there's the "Ida Basar" there now, my grandma lived there, too, the only surviving grandmother of all our children. All nine brothers and cousins would go to grandma's to eat some kompot, because the kompot was delicious there, everyone knew that the kompot was good and delicious there. It was an old Polish house with a huge kitchen and a huge bathroom, and we'd gather in that bathroom and play all sorts of games, including the one where we'd compete who's the least Jewish-looking. And in general our parents would give us names that... Nice games, right?

EŽ: Interesting, at least.

FK: Interesting, indeed. We'd be given names that hadn't been used before the War, they tried to give names like that, our mothers were somehow very strongly affected by it... We were really the first post-War children... They were very strongly affected by the losses during the War and very afraid that if, God forbid, something like that were to happen again, God forbid nothing bad would happen to their children. Therefore our names, although dedicated to killed or dead family members, which is a usual thing for Jews, they were tweaked in a way that would make it impossible to recognize that it's a Jewish name. Add the surname to the mix and, since I was

Faina Kuklianskytė, I would always win the game, I was special, especially unrecognizable, plus, I was a blonde and I was an especially unrecognizable Jew. And overall, when I was little, our family had a set of very strict and clear rules. We had one grandma from the mother's side and two grandpas, one from the mother's side and the other from the father's. My father's side of the family was very educated, my great-great-great-grandfather had graduated from Warsaw University, he was a medical doctor, he took part in the 1863 Uprising, he was treating the rebels in the woods. Their neighbor in Veisiejai was Zamenhof, the Esperanto man, who for some reason in the town with Kuklianskis—let's say that the Kuklianskis didn't want to be friends with him and so he left for Warsaw after a while. Then, say, my grandfather, he studied and graduated in pharmacy in Saratov, then graduated from Cape Town University of Chemical Engineering, then from Kaunas Institute of Medicine, and the grandmother was a doctor, too. Grandpa would give the same presents to all his grandchildren. We all have the same—to this day, when we meet, we all have the same album with leather covers, we have the globe, the magnifier, we have the things—the things of intelligentsia that each family had to have. E.g., you could find a Sholem Aleichem in every family. He's a very famous Jewish writer, we used to all read Russian back in the day, it was a natural thing, and if you were to ask me how I feel, how I'm doing, how I feel myself, I'd tell you the words of Sholem Aleichem, in Jewish, in Yiddish: “Mir iz gut, ikh bin a yosem.” There is this book about a boy called Motl. He's an orphan. And the book begins with: “I'm fine, I'm an orphan.”;

EŽ: Seeing how several generations of your family had lawyers in it—at the time that was really a huge achievement—did that influence your choice of studies?

FK: I don't know. You know, in the second grade they told us to write down what we want to be when we grow up, and I wrote “lawyer”... “Interrogator”. I could read both Lithuanian and Russian. There was [Lev] Sheinin's book *Zapiski sledovatelja* [*The Investigator's Notes*] in our home, a very interesting book, a thick one, as well as a book by [Anatoly] Koni, one of the greatest Russian lawyers, a book on his, I mean, his cases and his speeches. I'd been reading these books from the early days, not to mention Kalle Blomkvist etc. here. I was passionate about it and I wanted to be, to tell you the truth, a legal historian. But I was not accepted to any school. I was on such low demand that, despite my good grades, no one wanted me anywhere, neither at science academies nor at universities...

EŽ: And in your opinion, why was that, was it your character?

FK: What do you mean “character”?

EŽ: Oh, it was because of..

FK: I'm a Jew, my relatives are all abroad, I'm not a party member, in short, I'm nowhere. I got appointed to work at the Dvarčionys [ceramics] factory, and I was crying so much, I didn't want to go there so much that my father went to see the Dean, Professor Kūris, who was a wonderful man, and he told my father: “For the first time in my life, I see a father who wants his child to live worse rather than better.” He said: “What's her problem with that Dvarčionys factory?” And I wanted to be either a scientist or an interrogator. And in the end I was, somehow, with a lot of *blat* [favors], accepted to the Militsiya, because Mikalauskas was the chief back then, and he was

a former classmate of my uncle. I got employed as a Militsiya officer. [*Russian*] “I serve the Soviet Union.” Horrible. Horrible. So horrible, I can’t even describe it. They had me wear the uniform, with the tubeteika and all, I had to cross the street and district inspectors would salute me and then I’d have to salute them. Later on, I became the best interrogator in the Soviet Union.

EŽ: But is it true that at the time the Militsiya would have you investigate the most, say, unusual cases?..

FK: Yes. Rapes, murders. They should rather thank me for having worked in the Militsiya for eight years, night and day. With a stomach up to here I came rushing to my last murder scene and they didn’t want to let me in, “Who are you,” they told me. I’m trying to get them to see my ID, that I’m the police here, and at the time I was already captain, head of the interrogation department, if I recall correctly. My God, it took them a while to let me into the scene. But I, for one—those were very hard times for me, there was a lot of work, two little kids, but it was all very interesting. It was all really very interesting and I don’t regret a day of working there. Someone has to do this job, someone has to fight crime, you can’t do without it. The police officers, they are fighting the crime the same way today.

EŽ: After your career in the Militsiya, well, your dream probably came true, you became a lawyer?

FK: No, at first I was a prosecutor, which was also a dream of mine.

EŽ: Very unwomanly dreams, I’d say.

FK: It was a holiday home to me.

EŽ: Prosecutor’s office was a holiday home?

FK: Yes, it was much less, much less work. Then I became a lawyer and I’m a lawyer to this day.

EŽ: But then seven years ago, if I remember correctly, you took part in the LJC Chair election and won, right?

FK: I don’t remember how many years ago that was, because to me it all seems like an eternity. So it happened that our Chairman Mr. Alperavičius had been ill for a long time and I had been standing in for him and, since he was completely alone, I also had to devote my attention to him personally, and it was his decision that I would take over his office, which he made, I don’t know, seven years ago, you say? It may have been seven. Yes.

EŽ: You know, from the outside your job seems both very important and, well, pleasant: upon arriving to Lithuania the Pope came to shake your hand—well, you came to shake the Pope’s hand; the wealthiest Jew in the world Roman Abramovich meets you when the rest of Lithuania doesn’t even know about his visit; the Prime Minister of Israel... But, on the other hand, the job doesn’t seem that attractive because, well, when you’re in a position like that, you also have to fight against your own people sometimes. We see some of your own people protesting outside your office, trying to get you to resign, there are court processes and things that come out in the

public when they seem like they should stay inside the community. So, what does your job look like from the inside?

FK: Well, first of all, it's not a job. I'm still working as a lawyer, just like before, and this is more of a social position. Your description was very much on-point. I have a lot of pleasant responsibilities. The Pope was only one of them, but I get to meet a lot of new people, which I find very interesting, and during these years I've learned much more than I knew before, I got to know the people, in short, nothing to complain about. And when I assess my general situation, it's clear that if everyone around me stays healthy and nothing happens to them, everything's fine, I'm truly a very happy person. Chairing the Jewish Community is hard work. First of all, it's the never-ending problems and tension. Of course, the most terrible tension is the one inside the community. The ugliest and... But there's nothing you can do about it. What can you do? Somebody started it all, it wasn't my own initiative for sure, but now I have to deal with it somehow. I can always quit. No one's holding me, after all. I can always quit, but I think that my choice to keep working is the right one, because there are unfinished tasks that I want to see to. You know that we have around a thousand and a half people in the social center, we have children with illnesses that we have to integrate into the society, people are getting very low wages, very low pensions, and we have to help them. After all, we have political tasks, too, to spread our culture, to communicate with the whole world and with the whole Lithuania, to solve various issues with the mayors, and sometimes they're literal riddles, because I, for one, am not a practicing Jew, I know some things but I don't know the others, so I'm also dependent on the opinions of the rabbis, which also differ greatly at times. Except the cases like the one I told you about today, or exceptions, our relationship with the authorities of Lithuania is very good. Very good. I really have nothing to complain about.

[Still in the show]

FK: I'm a tough one, nothing one can do about that, that's just what I am.

EŽ: And what is your style of rule at home?

FK: My husband is a stubborn Samogitian.

[We'll be right back]

EŽ: You said that shouts, protests, or fistfights are not your style. And what is your style, then? I suspect it's not gentle caresses either, is it?

FK: Oh no, I'm really not the one walking around kissing everyone. I'm a tough one, nothing one can do about that, that's just what I am. But I am always slowly moving towards my goal. In general, in my work I am always really looking for people who are more intelligent than I am. I'm not looking for someone stupider than me, I need people more intelligent than me to advise me. I do consult with others, perhaps someone thinks I don't, well, I don't consult with everyone, with the whole world, and with the whole five thousand, I'm not running from one Jew to another. But I call people and they come to me, we discuss things, we try to find ways and to have a common policy that would make the lives of Jews, of those few remaining Jews still living in Lithuania—and there are many mixed families, too, and their children get different

influences from the mixed families—we are trying to do everything that’s in our power to make these people feel at home and in their Homeland. That is our most important task. We, Jews, are indeed the chosen ones. We have two homelands: we have our historical Homeland, Israel, and we have our Homeland, in which we were born and have been living for six hundred years, and let no one dare tell me when I should leave or stay in this Homeland. I’ll be the judge of what I should do. Let him be in uniform or not in uniform, let me be a kike or not a kike... OK, I’ll be a kike then, but I’ll live here, in Lithuania, for as long as I like. And if Lithuania declares itself to be a democratic state open to all ethnicities, does anybody really have the right to make me leave it?

EŽ: And now I’m interested: and what is your style of rule at home? Were you the head of the family for both husbands of yours?

FK: Well, how to put it...

EŽ: Tell the truth.

FK: My first husband was a very sophisticated Jew. But he was, well, how to put it, he wasn’t... I can’t say he wasn’t “the head of the family”, we lived a friendly life, I can’t really describe it, but, of course, I’d always have the last word. Now I live with a Samogitian. So it’s a little more complicated.

EŽ: That’s an interesting duo.

FK: A Samogitian is a more complicated case. But we reach compromises. One can always reach a compromise, can’t they? We have no things on which we couldn’t finally compromise. I see when he’s dissatisfied, but he loves the grandchildren so much that he’s defenseless against them. Whatever the grandchildren need, they’ll get it. By the way, my husband, my first husband was very attentive to children, too. So there’s a sort of a cult of children in our family. My husband, the same stubborn Samogitian, loves my children, who aren’t his children, and my grandchildren, who aren’t his grandchildren, he loves them as if they were his own and, I don’t know, he’d die for them. So we don’t have any situations where... I, too, for one, get a lot of support from my husband. Even when it comes to Jewish issues, he’s not a Jew and I wouldn’t say that he’s a professor of Jewish history or anything, but as a person, as a Samogitian who has lived here many years and through many generations, too, he really gives me a lot of support and I don’t know what I’d do without this support at home and in the family. And especially from my husband. Well, a husband is a husband, life is a colorful thing, and we live in a so-called “Italian backyard” [a stormy relationship], but that’s a normal thing, when people love each other, sometimes they also fight, and when they don’t, they find things happening to them unimportant: hello and goodbye. And when the relationship is real... As my aunt, my father’s sister, used to tell me: this must be your true love. Yes, this is my true love. I am very thankful to him for having appeared, for having appeared in my life at all, some people live their whole lives without getting to know what love is. And I really do.

EŽ: You know, just several weeks ago, right, 2020 started, which is the Year of the Gaon and Jews in Lithuania. I don't know if you practice the tradition of laying out plans for the year for yourself, but if we stay purely at the human level, what did you wish for yourself this year?

FK: For myself? First of all, good health.

EŽ: Fewer injuries, perhaps?

FK: Oh, this thing, it's nothing. I was skiing. Health is indeed the main thing, everything else can be dealt with, this year has many tasks and a lot of work prepared for us. I want peace in Lithuania. I feel like everyone's on the edge, this is not how things should be, so few people and they're all fighting between themselves. And you know, when you come back home from somewhere where the skies are blue and the people are merry and smiling, and you come here... The skies are blue today.

EŽ: Can't take that away.

FK: But you come back to this grayness, to this tension, to this... Somehow I want a life that's more fun. I want my children to be successful, so that's that, family first. I want... At some point I made a huge mistake, my father would always tell me that work comes first, and family can wait, but now I'm of a completely different opinion: family must come first. I want them all to be happy and I want to do what I have planned for the Jewish community this year, too. And the things that I want to accomplish are very serious, but it's not a task for me and myself, we have to accomplish them collectively. Overall, life is great, just by the way. You know, it's like having a wife: you only understand that you need your wife as much as you need air when you lose that air, then you understand how necessary it was to you. Just like life—we need to appreciate what we have, to enjoy life, to see the glass half-full, and to try and be happy.

[vignette]

EŽ: And that's it for tonight. I hope you'll stay with "Lietuvos Rytas" TV, and as for us, well, we'll meet here exactly in a week, the same time next Friday.