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Litvak who tried unsuccessfully to get back Lithuanian citizenship: "Lithuania is dead for Jews"

by Monika Bončkutė and Vladas Krivickas

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Especially for lrytas.lt from Los Angeles

"Litvaks don't want anything more to do with Lithuania because they understand that Lithuania doesn't need them. Even if the anti-Semitism stopped, the gap is too wide. Lithuania is dead for Jews," Grant Gochin, a US resident whose grandfather was born, grew up in and did military service for Lithuania.

Six years to regain citizenship wasn't enough

Gochin, a vice president of a bank, tried for more than six years to get back what he says rightfully belongs to him: Lithuanian citizenship. The volume of his correspondence with the Lithuanian embassy in Washington is impressive, comprising hundreds of emails, faxes and telephone conversations.

It appears from the correspondence between Gochin and Lithuanian embassy staff, first of all with first attaché Gabriele Klimaite, that our diplomats had no doubts that the Litvak would get citizenship.

"In my experience, they (Migration Department personnel -ed.) usually 'torture' a person two or three times before giving citizenship... You have nothing to fear. I am sure that sooner or later we will receive the good news," Klimaite told Gochin in an email.

Despite stubbornness and wasted time, Gochin, who already has US and South African citizenship, did not manage to become a citizen of our country. He told Irytas. It was certain the reason for the negative decision was his ethnicity.

Lithuanian citizenship policy is xenophobic

They demanded from me absurd proofs and documents which ethnic Lithuanians don't need to provide," Gochin said.

He said he's almost convinced that unwritten rules apply to Jews, rules that are not applied to ethnic Lithuanians.

Lithuanian embassy attaché Klimaite, who corresponded with Gochin for several years, also got the impression that Lithuanian officials were against certain groups of descendents of Lithuanian citizens living abroad.

In a personal letter sent in November, 2006, she called the Lithuanian government's attitude toward citizenship "very very xenophobic." She also said about the Constitutional Court finding at that time concerning citizenship: "I think that this is suicide to our little country, when people are constantly emigrating."

"But the court was apathetic, they simply said that historically the country has always sought to maintain a homogenous society and that that should continue," Klimaite wrote.

Money goes to Africa, US and Israel instead

Rejected by Lithuania, the wealthy American looked to Africa, a continent that has always appreciated his humanitarian efforts. Gochin was decorated for his

efforts by the Republic of Togo with the title of Supreme Leader. Only a few Westerners have ever received this title; one of them was musician Michael Jackson, who died last year.

Gochin said that if Lithuania hadn't turned him away, he would have made the same efforts for the benefit of our country. Instead, the US, Africa and Israel allegedly are making use of his expertise and financial resources now.

"Lithuania clearly demonstrated that they don't need any of that," he said.

Denies he sought property restitution

Gochin denies the charge often leveled against foreigners that they want Lithuanian citizenship in order to gain something. Gochin said his grandfather didn't have any real estate that descendants could make claim to and that he is not interested in a career in politics.

"There's a big difference between 'need' and 'want'," the South African-born resident of Los Angeles told Irytas.lt. "I don't need another citizenship. I want it. I was very close with my grandfather. I wanted to pass on the tie to Lithuania to future generations as an inheritance, and in that way to preserve the memory of my grandfather even after I'm dead."

He said that he and other Jews who call themselves Litvaks wanted only one thing after Lithuania regained independence: to restore the emotional tie with the country dear to them, and to help the country.

Jews would help economy and stop emigration

"Every Lithuanian family that has children or grand-children who have emigrated should consider whether they would have work in Lithuania if the government had given people such as me citizenship. We were ready to be very helpful. We could have helped bring the economy up, attract investment and stimulate industry. Lithuania is experiencing a 20 percent shrinkage of GDP. Lithuanians should understand that by not allowing people in who are in some way different, they are hurting themselves most of all," Gochin said.

He offered the USA as an example, whose success is a result of diversity, an open system and the desire to accept citizens of different backgrounds and education.

He added further that Litvaks form a very closely connected community with a tendency towards philanthropic activity and always oppose inequality and discrimination.

“Although Litvaks make up just 2 percent of the white population of South Africa, they comprised 50 percent of whites who fought apartheid,” Gochin noted.

Four Visits to Lithuania

Growing up in South Africa, Gochin always heard his grandfather Samuel Gochin’s stories about Lithuania. His grandfather always recalled the years he spent in Lithuania as “golden.” He told his grandson about life in Lithuania and service in the army of Independent Lithuanian. Gochin still has a photograph of his grandfather wearing the uniform of a Lithuanian soldier.

Samuel Gochin’s son Harold, Grant’s father who still lives in South Africa, also wanted to visit Lithuania, but after restoration of Lithuanian independence Gochin’s father was of too feeble health, so the grandchild of the Lithuanian soldier travelled alone to the land of his forefathers in 1992. He visited cities and towns and the graves of relatives and was charmed by Lithuania and her people.

Stacks of Documents Presented

After that he visited the country at least three times. When he learned that under the laws at that time he could apply for citizenship in the country of his forefathers, he submitted an application through the Lithuanian embassy in Washington, on December 28, 2004, for consideration by the Migration Department.

Gochin presented the Migration Department records from archives showing his grandfather had been given an internal passport [?] and served in the Lithuanian military. Later he discovered and provided to the department a record from the

J. Basanavicius Military Hospital containing notes on the medical treatment of S. Gochin.

When doubts arose on whether S. Gochin really was a Lithuanian citizen, his grandson provided a comprehensive explanation by Lithuanian historians to the effect that the person in the photograph wearing the uniform of the Lithuanian military could be the citizen of no other country. Lithuania, of course, did not conscript foreigners to serve in its armed forces.

Immediately after he provided written testimonies from people who remembered S. Gochin to the effect that this person truly lived [here] and that G. Gochin is certainly his grandchild.

Invisible People Worry Migration Department

The Migration Department, which is only required to answer [citizenship applications] once every six months, began demanding always more proof, not just on the citizenship of the American's grandfather but equally the connection between Grant Gochin and Samuel Gochin.

“My application was rejected based on the idea there could have been two Samuel Gochins. One who was mentioned in the documents I provided, and another ‘possible’ Samuel Gochin whose existence hasn’t been proved. How can one think that there could be two people with the same name and surname in the same village, and that if I’m related to one of them, I must prove whether I am related to the real or the imaginary person?” Gochin said angrily.

“It’s the same thing as someone saying he is surrounded by invisible people then asking to prove that he isn’t,” the descendant of Lithuanian Jews said.

He said that Lithuania must assume responsibility for the fact that only a record of a passport issued to S. Gochin is contained in the Lithuanian archives, rather than the original passport. During the war a large portion of Lithuanian Jewish archives were destroyed or lost.

Gochin said the Migration Department’s delay on a decision and request for ever more documents was an insult to the memory of his grandfather and that he had been treated unfairly. “It’s obvious their intentions were unfair; they

intentionally looked for ways to reject my application instead of conscientiously considering my case,” Gochin claimed.

Gochin Calls Citizenship Application Form Discriminatory

He called the process for requesting citizenship “discriminatory.” The form demands the person’s ethnicity as well as current citizenship. Lithuanian diplomats told Gochin he was obligated to enter “Jew” on the form rather than “Lithuanian.”

“Judaism is a religion, not an ethnicity. I told that diplomat that I am as much a Lithuanian as he is, and that this kind of questionnaire seemed discriminatory to me, but he said I had no other choice but to confirm I am a Jew,” he said angrily.

He said in informal conversations with Lithuanian citizens, they had said the Lithuanian government tries to maintain the “national character of the people,” and is worried that if they got citizenship, Jews would begin en masse to take back the assets that belonged to their great-grandparents before the war.

An Insult to Grandfather’s Memory

With less than a month to go until the 2006 ruling by the Constitutional Court that a Lithuanian citizen cannot be a citizen of another state, Gochin received the Migration Department’s decision to reject his application. His request for restoring citizenship was rejected for lack of proof that S. Gochin was truly his grandfather.

“The decision rejecting restoring Lithuanian citizenship to me reached me about 28 days after the Migration Department made the decision. The period during which I could appeal the decision was 30 days. In other words, I had no opportunity to appeal. They insulted the memory of my grandfather and acted unjustly with me, and their motives for rejecting my request were unfair. And I thought Lithuania was a state under the rule of law,” Gochin said on his decision to take the Migration Department to court.

The foreigner hired the attorney Stasys Sedbaras. The US citizen admitted he had considered spending \$20,000 to prove he was entitled to Lithuanian

citizenship. The legal fight, which so far hasn't yielded any tangible results, has cost him about \$4,000. The Sedbaras firm has often intimated to Gochin he has no chance of winning the case.

He No Longer Wants to be Part of Lithuanian Society

Admitting that he can no longer spend as much time on it, Gochin said that nevertheless he will continue to fight as much as he can. The American said it bothered him that the Vilnius District 2 court had not even asked him formally to renounce US and South African citizenship in exchange for the opportunity to restore Lithuanian citizenship. "Who gave them the right to automatically decide that I would not do this?" Gochin asked.

But the main reason the Litvak isn't letting it rest isn't really his citizenship. He wants the court to confirm that his grandfather is truly his grandfather. That is what the abovementioned court refused to do in its decision of February 25, 2008.

"That Lithuania where my grandfather spent his youth and which he called 'golden,' and based on the values of equality before the law and tolerance, no longer exists. Therefore I don't have any great desire anymore to be part of this society. I wanted a fair trial, but I didn't get it. Now all I want is for the court to recognize that my grandfather is my grandfather after all, a Jew and a citizen of Lithuania at the same time. It's obvious that in the current Lithuania to be a Jew and a Lithuanian citizen at the same time is impossible," Gochin, who no longer wants to invest in Lithuanian business or travel around the country, said.

Embassy Denies Discrimination

Since G. Klimaite no longer works at the embassy in Washington, Irytas.lt talked to Laimis Rubinskas, who, according to his own words, is the embassy's third secretary in charge of economic affairs. The official said he had dealt with Gochin numerous times via email, telephone and "live."

"He often presented his requests in a demanding and even categorical form. The embassy is providing him all possible aid and information on the matter of citizenship, as it does for anyone who asks," Rubinskas said.

He said Klimaite hadn't provided him with anything specific about the Gochin case. The official said he was firmly convinced that Gochin's case was in no way extraordinary, and the pace of consideration and the result had nothing in common with his ethnicity. Further, Jews inquiring about Lithuanian citizenship are nothing new for the embassy.

"At the current time the absolute majority of applications for citizenship come from Mexico and are made by Mexicans of Jewish origins living there, whose great-grandparents left Lithuania during the interwar period," Rubinskas said.

Asked how many such requests are fulfilled and how many rejected, the official replied that the embassy does not categorize applications received according to ethnicity and "doesn't keep such statistics."

