THE MURDER OF JEWS IN LITHUANIA: A PIGSTY AND THE HOLOCAUST

I wrote this article in response to ideas expressed by the minister of justice, Remigijus Šimašius, that first appeared in BNS [Baltic News Service], and later on the "Delfi" portal. The minister categorically states that we, Lithuanians, are not a nation of Jew-shooters. I agree that there cannot be any collective responsibility, and that we - those of us who did not take part in the killing of the Jews, and who were not born until after the Second World War - cannot be called Jew-shooters.

In the first place, there is no such thing as collective, national, or state responsibility. Furthermore, Lithuania was occupied during the time of the Holocaust, and the very idea of exterminating Jews was born not in Lithuania, but in the minds of the leaders of fascist Germany. And thus far - more than half a century after the war - no-one has called the entire German nation fascists or Jew-shooters.

But to say that nothing happened in Lithuania during the Second World War, and that we are innocent, is incorrect. A fact remains a fact - in the years while Germany occupied Lithuania, an entire ethnic minority, with the same right to live in Lithuania as that held by Lithuanians, was swept away with the active participation of Lithuanians. It was enough to be a Jew to be transported to Auschwitz, or to be killed in Lithuania.

Certain Lithuanians did actively participate in the killing of the Jews. Why? There is no unilateral response. One side takes on a defensive position, while the other accuses an entire nation of this crime, attaching the label "Jew-shooter" even to those who had not been born at the time. One cannot change the past, but one must reflect upon it.

I was born and grew up in northern Lithuania, in Linkuva, in 1957. The Jews had long disappeared from Linkuva - the town was entirely Lithuanian. I wouldn't even have known that there had, not so long ago, been a Jewish community there, if not for my grandfather, who more than once talked about his neighbour Jonas, who had dropped in for a visit, wearing a very expensive coat, when the war had just started. When my grandfather asked him how much he paid for it, Jonas laughed and said, he had "gotten it from Joshke who was dying".

Jonas took part in the killing of the Jews of Linkuva. Later, towards the end of the war, he tried to escape to the West, but ended up in the Crimea, where he married a Jewish woman and was even awarded the title of Socialist working hero. Several decades later he was tracked down by the KGB, and served fifteen years in jail. I met him only the once, after he'd served his sentence, and was living quietly in Vilnius. I didn't ask (I was too young to ask such a question) why he had killed his Jewish neighbours. After all, they'd gone to the same school together, and when his father was in trouble, he'd borrowed goods from the Jews "on credit".

My grandfather said that the Lithuanian merchants would never sell things "on credit", but that the Jews had no problem doing so. Perhaps one of the reasons for the killings was an attempt to get rid of debts by murdering the lender, and becoming rich by plundering his property. I don't know, but simply from a human point of view, it was a neighbour killing his neighbour.

The Lithuanians were no exception. At the end of the 20th century, Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslims also killed their neighbours whose ancestors had lived in the same village for hundreds of years. Some explain that it's part of a peasant mentality, that death - whether animal or human - is looked at naturally, without any sentiment. But I cannot believe that a peasant mentality is the answer to the question of why what happened in Lithuania at the start of the Second World War, happened. In our village, it was only that one Jonas who took part in killing the Jews.

Another question - did many Lithuanians take part in helping their Jewish neighbours, classmates, etc.? If the entire Jewish community was swept away, then probably not. It was the negative Lithuanian characteristic - not to get involved, to bow down to every master, to not get into trouble and hence to survive - that won out. Lithuanian peasants avoided "getting involved in politics", were afraid to borrow from banks (and often for no reason), and tried to go to church on Sunday in order to save their souls.

But it is incorrect and foolish to accuse the Lithuanian villagers for the killing of the Jews. The "famous" killing in a garage in Kaunas alone (the subject of so much that appears in Western literature), precludes any such conclusion. There must have been other, deeper reasons, which must still be found and understood. A defensive position, that we are not a nation of Jew-shooters - period - leads nowhere. I would like to understand what it is in our nation that led us to destroy the entire Jewish ethnic minority. Without reflecting on this question, it is difficult to understand the past, and to create a future. It's even more important for us, being Lithuanians.

A very popular explanation in Lithuania is that the Jews were NKVD assistants in 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. But as far as I know, both Justas Paleckis, and the first head of the NKVD in Lithuania - Antanas Sniečkus - were Lithuanians. On the other hand, a fair number of Jewish people did take part in establishing soviet authority - but that cannot be any kind of justification for murder.

In the first place, those who were guilty managed to flee to the East along with the Soviet army, and in the second place, Jewish citizens of Lithuania were mercilessly deported to Siberia, just like Lithuanian citizens of Lithuania. Did the participation of a number of Jews in setting up a Soviet government give Jonas the right to shoot Joshke and take away his coat? As far as I know, Joshke had his own shop and took no part in any kind of politics. And from what I was told, Jonas was not a hardened Lithuanian nationalist, and before the war he was not involved in politics.

But why were there men like Jonas who took an active part in exterminating the Jewish minority and its very rich culture in Lithuania, thereby impoverishing the country itself? Let's not fool ourselves. Even now in Lithuania, when one can count on one hand the number of existing Jews, there is anti-Semitism, especially on a daily level. When there is no explanation for some event or other, one always comes back to the Jews - they're the ones who created the economic crisis and who rule America, the European Union is a Jewish plot, etc. etc. And if "Delfi" issues an article, there are so many anti-Semitic commentaries, that one would think that the likes of Jonas continue to live among us.

In conclusion, let's go back to Linkuva. There is an old Jewish cemetery at one edge of the town. During the Soviet time it was abandoned, now it is nicely maintained, with cut bushes and grass. The only problem is that no-one can read what is written on those gravestones. On the other side of town is what is known in Lithuania as "a site of the genocide of the Jews". I've been to the old Jewish cemetery many times, but it was only a few years ago that I drove out to where the community was destroyed.

A gravel road leads to the killing site on the other side of town. Upon approaching, even in the car one catches the stench of a pigsty. And there, barely a few dozen metres from the site marked with a commemorative monument, stands a huge pigsty. Surrounding it are empty fields. Who could possibly explain why the pigsty was set up exactly there? It appeared in the Soviet period, but all the same, it is in Lithuania, and I don't believe that an official in Moscow would have ordered the kolkhoz chairman to build a pigsty right on that spot.

It's hard to believe that a chairman would do so deliberately, with the intent to desecrate the memory of the annihilated community - he wouldn't have had the brains to do so. It was probably built there simply because there was a good road, and because it was far enough away from the town to not carry the stench. The Jewish community had been exterminated - not only physically, but spiritually as well. It no longer exists in the history of the town, or in the minds of the people.

The pigsty complex has apparently recently been bought by Danes, who are making it even larger. Nothing has changed. It is worse than sad - not only was the town's ethnic community destroyed, its memory is being profaned after its demise. It will continue to happen every day in Linkuva until it is finally understood that it is no place for a pigsty.

Valentinas MITĖ

ABOUT THE JEWS

I recently read Valentinas Mitė's article on the Jews. Although I am not a journalist or a known figure, I was determined to respond to some of the journalist's questions: why where the Jews of Lithuania punished so brutally, what kind of people did that, and what was their fate? I will start with the why. Lithuanians have been waiting for ages for a leader like the great Vytautas, for someone who would lead us even farther than the Black Sea. Our nation does not like foreigners, spongers. We need farmers, people who do real work. Ninety years ago, when my grandfather took his son to the gymnasium in Linkuva, the town that appears in the article, he declared to his neighbours that he [his son] won't be a worker, he'll be a little thief. Like everyone around him, grandfather was convinced that anyone who doesn't work the land is a sponger who will do his best to get in the way of real working people. It was enough for the Jews not to work the land to be looked upon with suspicion. Church hymns included the Jews daily - they were mentioned in every prayer to do with the murder of Jesus Christ. In Lithuania Jews had the power in the banks, courts, medicine and commerce, and many of the Lithuanians in these spheres considered them to be competition. One of the principal blows to our farmers was that by about 1940, a number of farms were in debt to the Jews, and were put up for auction. My mother spoke in detail about our closest neighbour, who piled everything he held dear - his dog, furs, samovar, bolt of homespun cloth - into his wagon, and drove it into town. There he knelt down and kissed the shoes of the first German who came by, and gave him all of his goods. The neighbour was pleased that he'd payed back the Germans for, in his words, shooting "the damn Jews".

Mother often talked about the "contingent" of Jew-shooters - hooligan teenagers, 14-16 years old, who, after being fed liquor, could satisfy their sadistic nature. She also spoke of another neighbour, an adult, who, alongside a trench dug for the Jews, declared that a bullet was too good for them: he would grab small children by the foot, and smash their heads against the trunk of a pine tree. A quiet, good farmer named Klemensas, he returned from Siberia in about 1956, and carried on living a devout life. Engraved in my memory are the words of a Russian who justified volunteering for the war in Afghanistan: I don't see anywhere else that I can shoot at living people. And on "Delfi" [website], there's a huge number of commentaries by young people that are totally in accordance with the sentiments of 1941. My neighbour, a young man, said that he hates the Jews because they make matzos out of the blood of Lithuanian children. I think that these days there would be even more Jew-shooters. The way is paved for that. Not a single "straight shooter" has been punished in Lithuania. If anyone wanted to, they could find many witnesses of the killings, who would now talk about them. Now it's much more real than thirty years ago. All those who raised their guns against unarmed people were kept on throughout the entire war, and after the war, those who weren't deported or who didn't run away to America, went into the forests and joined the criminal units, and some who returned from the labour camps settled among their own people. Everyone was afraid of them, and no-one talked about them, for they felt that careless talk could lead to unexplained deaths. A number of them are the patriots of their village - those who want their village to appear pure and chaste.

Our government is also interested in maintaining a good Lithuanian image. But you can't create that artificially. We must come to terms with the fact that though we live in a land of heroes, our deeds at home and even in the West are already being noticed throughout the world. I often wonder about the "everyday" pools of blood - maybe they weren't the work of some respected person, but that of a descendant of a Jew-shooter?

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