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## E. Zuroff: Skinhead March Threatens Lithuanian Democracy (interview)

by Šarūnas Černiauskas  
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Photo caption: Not angry: Even though the Holocaust took away the lives of relatives of E. Zuroff's family, he says he doesn't have any desire for revenge. © "Reuters"

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Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center Efraim Zuroff says he's worried by the growing influence of nationalists in Lithuania. He thinks politicians aren't even trying to control this element.

The man called the last Nazi hunter shared these insights in an exclusive interview with the KaunoDiena.lt webpage. Zuroff said the march on March 11 and the acquittal of Petras Stankeras for possible Holocaust denial are serious signals showing that there is a lack of political will in Lithuania to fight expressions of neo-Nazism.

The head of the Wiesenthal Center also believes that Soviet repressions in Lithuania can't be called genocide. He says Lithuanian politicians could just as well successfully call our basketball losses genocide.

Let's start with the latest events. On March 11 the march of so-called patriotic youth took place which caused indignation among ethnic minority organizations and civic-minded people. The Wiesenthal Center earlier called on the Vilnius municipality to annul the permit to organize this event, but was not heeded. What do you think about this march?

“I react to it with great pain and regret for the ethnic minorities living in Lithuania, especially for the Jewish community. I also feel anger because of the delayed reaction by government officials. They only expressed their opinion after their silence was criticized beyond Lithuania’s borders. Can you imagine how a person who survived the Holocaust feels, seeing swastikas ceremoniously carried on the main street in Vilnius?”

The Government and the main political parties condemned the events of the march. Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius stated it discredits the concept of “patriotism” in Lithuania. Are these sorts of statements sufficient?

[large quote text box: E. Zuroff: “If the Parliament of Lithuania has the resolve to rewrite the definition of the concept of ‘genocide,’ I believe they will soon also call genocide any loss by the Lithuanian national basketball team.”]

“The reaction by the Prime Minister and the President was very weak. This opinion was stated only because of pressure from abroad. I want to praise non-governmental organizations and the seventeen intellectuals who spoke up and signed an important letter of protest to the President.”

These marches take place in Lithuania every year, the number of participants is rather stable, perhaps it is even growing gradually. What do you think might happen if they are not banned in the future?

There is no doubt that such movements threaten Lithuanian democracy. I want to remind you that the Nazi party only had seven members at the beginning.

Another event for which the Wiesenthal Center has criticized Lithuania is the case of the historian P. Stankeras. Prosecutors withdrew a pre-trial investigation on possible Holocaust denial in his publication, and Stankeras himself said he hadn’t tried to belittle the crimes of the Nazis. What do you make of these events?

“I think that many have not noticed the title of Stankeras’s article, which clearly shows what he wanted to say. The title reads as follows: ‘The Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal: The Biggest Legal Farce in History.’ So if anyone has any doubts about Stankeras’s opinion, this headline, I think,

answers any questions. Lithuanian laws clearly say that denying Nazi crimes is a crime.”

What do you expect from Lithuanian government institutions if in the future a scandal on possible Holocaust denial arises again?

“I expect the Lithuanian government to follow Lithuanian laws. I expect that from every democratic country.”

The Wiesenthal Center has been watching the situation in Lithuania for a long time. How has it changed over the last few years?

“There is no doubt it has worsened. When in 1991 I began to work with Lithuanian representatives, striving for Nazi criminals to receive justice, I didn’t think that Lithuania is a country with serious problems of antisemitism. Today I can’t say that. Currently Lithuania has serious problems with antisemitism. This is demonstrated by the hunt for Jewish partisans, and justification of the swastika as an ‘historical symbol of Lithuanians’, the marches by neo-Nazis and ultranationalists, and the firing of Professor Dovid Katz, who defended Jewish partisans attacked for ‘war crimes’ that never happened, from Vilnius University. The same thing is demonstrated by the campaign in the country attempting to equate falsely Communist and Nazi crimes. The sad truth is that things in Lithuania have gotten much worse after it was accepted into the EU and NATO.”

You have often condemned Lithuania for not being able to punish Nazi criminals or to control expressions of nationalism. Is the current Government making any sort of progress?

“If it’s moving at all, it’s moving backwards.”

You mentioned that Lithuania is attempting to falsely equate the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism. You have also said many times that Soviet repressions of the Lithuanian nation cannot be called genocide. That hurts the feelings of many people in Lithuania. So why, in your opinion, are the repressions experienced by the Lithuanian nation not genocide?

“I have to stress that the term ‘genocide’ is very well defined. That is a campaign or plan which seeks, I underline, to totally destroy a certain ethnic

group [= “nation” in Lithuanian]. It does not include other crimes, however horrible or disgusting they are.

“So while I do sympathize with the victims of Communist repression, conscience does not allow me to call those crimes genocide, because they simply weren’t genocide. Of course, if the Lithuanian Parliament has the resolve to rewrite the definition of the concept of ‘genocide, I think they soon will just as well call genocide any loss by the Lithuanian national basketball team.

“I have said clearly many times that I condemn the crimes of Communism and support the prosecution of their perpetrators. But not because they committed genocide. Believe me, they are sufficiently evil even if they don’t fall under the concept of ‘genocide.’”

Many Lithuanian politicians and public figures call your statements about Lithuania biased or incorrect. Others say you chose Lithuania as an easy target, because our country is criticized much more harshly than most European states. So do you have a special position regarding Lithuania?

“Lithuania will be special as long as questions connected with the Jewish community are touched upon. Also, because of the history of the Jews of Lithuania and the horrifying legacy of the Holocaust. Those who accuse me of bias regarding Lithuania ignore the work I’ve done over 30 years in Germany, Austria, Poland, Romania, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Latvia, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary and many other countries. I have always tried to be fair regarding all countries, to praise good works and to criticize failure. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to praise in Lithuania and there were many reasons to criticize.”

The name Efraim was given to you in honor of your grandfather’s brother. He was one of many Holocaust victims in Lithuania. Don’t you feel a special desire for revenge?

“Revenge would mean that I would have to take justice in my own hands and physically deal with people, rather than attempt to see to it that they are punished according to law. I can’t allow personal feelings to become mixed with my work, because then I couldn’t be objective. When I try to make sure that German, Austrian, Croatian, Hungarian or Latvian Nazi criminals

answer for their crimes, I feel the exact same sympathy for their victims that I do for my grandfather's brother, his wife and their two young sons.”

Are you planning to visit Lithuania soon?

“I plan to come this summer to a wonderful literary seminar [SLS Lithuania] where a special program will be mostly devoted to Litvak history and heritage.”

Are you perhaps planning on meeting with government representatives?

“When Algirdas Brazauskas led the country, I did meet with the president himself several times. But when Valdas Adamkus was elected, everything changed. I am always ready to meet with high government officials and to discuss issues causing concern to both sides.”

Do Lithuanian Jews support the criticism you make?

“I consider the Lithuanian Jewish Community my own family. But everyone knows that members of the same family don't necessarily agree on everything. From the very start, since 1991, I've maintained excellent relations with the Jewish community. They have provided much support on certain issues, especially when Dr. Simonas Alperavičius began to lead the community. On the other hand, some Jews left the community or were expelled [reference to a member of parliament]. They deeply harmed Jewish interests for their own profit or careers. I don't want to associate with such Jews.”

What changes in Lithuanian policy could soften the Wiesenthal Center's position regarding our country?

“First of all, the Lithuanian government has to stop the incitement of antisemitism and incitement against the local Jewish community. Second, to tell the truth about the role of Lithuanians in Holocaust crimes, to prosecute and punish the Holocaust perpetrators who still can be, and to stop spreading the lie of the Prague Declaration (referring to a document signed in 2008 which condemns the crimes of communism and calls for equal judgment of the crimes of all totalitarian regimes – Editor). The education system has to teach the truth about the Holocaust: it has to talk about not just happened in Germany, Austria or Hungary, but also about the crimes which Lithuanians

committed in Lithuania. If the government is planning to glorify the LAF (the Lithuanian Activist Front that operated in Nazi occupied Lithuania in 1940 to 1941 – Editor), I would suggest that they change their plans.”

Whether these changes are made or not, only the leaders of Lithuania will decide. Not Efraim Zuroff, not the Simon Wiesenthal Center and not the Lithuanian Jewish Community.