

Translation from:

http://www.lzinios.lt/lt/2011-05-05/pirmas_puslapis/kalbekime_patys_girdekime_kitus.html?print

...

V. Valiusaitis: Mr. Racinkas, doesn't the practice of the expression of your commission confirm certain political difficulties? Two members, it seems, have quit, right? Have political judgments divided?

Racinkas: That didn't happen because of political judgments. That was connected with the fact that one commission member Yitzhak Arad was invited to our prosecutor's office because of post-war events. And that was understood as a certain unfriendly, inimical action. It would be possible to do more that one show about that, obviously. We believe that there was action done not in the most appropriate manner. Essentially this is a reconciliation commission. People from different countries sit around one table, professional historians as well as public figures. And they, summarizing the works by professional historians, present assessments which are unanimous. This is the commission's strong side. And professor Suziedelis can confirm that we often discussed loudly the use of one word or another, how to call this or another situation, how to write this word or that, so that it would please everyone. Till now the commission has succeeded in adopting all conclusions by consensus. One can take pride in that.

But returning to the media, I believe there are two problems here. It's not just a problem of topics. There is also the problem of the content of the media themselves. Two elements differentiate themselves in our media: news which is intended to scandalize, to force a lower selling price, and opinions which are also expressed rather frequently without the proper reserve or responsibility for publicly uttered speech. Usually there is no deeper analysis. Just ringing epithets. Let's say, Efraim Zuroff. For some reason he is very popular in Lithuania, the media presents every statement he makes as very important, almost the opinion of all Jews in the world. But in Israel, if you ask who is Efraim Zuroff, people don't know who he is. I'm not talking about average people, even professionals don't know [this is edited in Lithuanian from what Racinkas actually said during the radio interview, which included a sort of snorting laugh but also different words, about "people on the street" rather than "ordinary people" and a different tone entirely.]

J. Ohman: In speaking about Zuroff and Dovid Katz, let's start with England. The latter is also a well-known figure. If we check who abroad is writing about Lithuanian history in English, it's Zuroff and Katz. I don't see any other texts, just theirs. I'm talking about the media, not history studies. In this sense they do have a certain importance, because they manage to get into the foreign media.

Racinkas: They write in a special kind of media, the left-wing Guardian. And that writing is used successfully in internal political struggles as well.

Ohman: I understand that perfectly well. But what does a foreigner who reads English know about Lithuanian history? Abroad no one knows anything about the Lithuanian

narrative. I have found this many times, in Scandinavia, America and elsewhere. If a person there can differentiate between Baltic states and Balkan countries, that's already a good achievement. I'm not joking.

On the internal situation in Lithuania, I'd like to note one important thing. Because I myself work in this field, I see the links between historians, academics, academic strata in general and the media and film industry are very weak. Extraordinarily weak. You have to keep in mind that no matter how good the works of academics or the studies by historians, ordinary people don't read them. You can't forget that.

Racinkas: Not only don't they read them, if studies by historians disagree with their convictions, they reject those studies. Convictions, the stories of their parents and grandparents, are a more important source of history to the individual than the works of professionals. And not just in Lithuania.

Valiusaitis: Who should initiate those closer ties between academia and the media? The historians? Probably not. It's easier to place the blame on journalists. But perhaps many negative things flow naturally out of ignorance? Perhaps the International Commission could assume the role of mediator between the disclosures of academia and the media, between studies and their popularity.

Suziedelis: I'd like to emphasize one thing. When we speak about Katz and Zuroff, whose writings sometimes devolve to gross demagoguery, although not always, we need to understand that they succeed partially because their narrative is accepted [acceptable] in the West, where most people's understanding of WWII is based on Stephen Spielberg films. Many there don't have the slightest idea what happened at that time in Lithuania. And sometimes that very same vocabulary [?] is their advantage. For example, the word "antifascist." In the West it only has a positive sense. But what sort of "antifascists" did my parents see? Stalinist, nothing other. For many people of Lithuania the word has no positive sense. And thus these two narratives can come to odds just because of the different sense of the vocabularies. Or, let's say, the Lithuanian word "post-war." How do you explain to a Westerner that ten times more ethnic Lithuanians died after the war than during the war? It is too much for them to wrap their heads around.

But it's not all hopeless. In this regard Timothy Snyder has written an important book called *Bloodlands*. It is popular now, the aforementioned figures have come out against it. Snyder found a way to present this narrative which, I think, is more acceptable, much more connected with our history. It is liked by many in the West because it isn't identified with a certain ethnic group or anything like that. Perhaps such works could somewhat affect the narrative of Westerners as well, to help them to understand that there could be another attitude toward World War II without violating historical truth.

Valiusaitis: Israeli political scientist Barry Rubin recently visited Lithuania. He also emphasized something that in my opinion is very important: "One must remember the brutal battles, the psychological and political situation Lithuania was in. We should understand that. Two powerful powers, each of them many times stronger than the small

state where very many fewer people lived. People were in a hopeless situation, attempted to get support from the Western democracies, but Lithuania was like a second Czechoslovakia and experienced a whole range of problems: antagonism [?], the Soviet invasion. Therefore partial support for fascist and marginal right-wing forces grew.” You don’t meet with such a sympathetic attitude in the West very often.

Makauskas: Yes, and I believe that sympathy will gradually become deeper. And there is more understanding from the Jewish side appearing as well, a deeper, broader take on the historical facts in Lithuania is palpable. For example, could these [facts] have taken place without the existence of the totalitarian systems? Is persecution of the Jews or people of other ethnicities conceivable without the war sparked by the totalitarian regimes and the inhumane conditions they created? Is similar behavior toward the Jews possible, say, in 1939? Is it possible to imagine that some citizen of Lithuania could have resolved to do this in the situation of 1939? It isn’t conceivable. In 1939, when the Germans were already deporting Jews from Poland, my grandparents took them across the border to Lithuania, helped them save themselves. A certain unity was still felt: this is my neighbor, he is in hardship, I need to help. But what happened in 1941 already...

Valiusaitis: Mr. Ohmanas, you have worked in the archives of Washington as well as Lithuania. You have found interesting documents there which, it seems, Lithuanian historians haven’t cited yet. Perhaps you could [say] a little more about that.

Ohmanas: Mainly I worked with CIA archives. There were truly many important things there from the post-war period. I can’t understand why no one from Lithuania has gone there. After all, everything there is in English, it’s easy enough. Before me, no one from Lithuania had been there, really. Of course I like that, that Lithuanian academics aren’t going there, because it’s very profitable. I’m joking, of course...

Truly, to get a view of what went on in Lithuania from outside is not only very interesting but also useful, it helps to understand better the events of that time. You see them through the eyes of observers from the Western states. Americans try to understand, meet with certain people, they tell what is happening here, the hatred of Russians, Jews, etc. suffusing society is tangible. The picture nonetheless differs somewhat from how the entire situation is viewed domestically. If you want to find sources to form a rather broad picture including many narratives, you have to work hard. In different languages, in different places.

Currently I have an émigré [community?] stipend to travel to foreign archives to collect material related to Lithuania in Scandinavia, France and elsewhere. Thank you, Lithuanian émigrés.

Valiusaitis: That’s incredible... It’s not Lithuanian historians using the potential and resources of the state, but the foreign journalist is provided with a stipend from the humble donations of Lithuanian émigré social activists and travels to foreign archives to serve that same state... Isn’t it paradoxical? It all seems to be happening the wrong way.

Suziedelis: Perhaps. But I have to say that there are two articles taken from that same “State Department” archive published in *Lituanus* and other magazines where a visit by US diplomats to Kaunas is discussed after the Bolsheviks have arrived, talking about how relations between Lithuanians and Jews have turned so extraordinarily sour. And we know this not just from external sources, American diplomats and so on, but also from the Lithuanian State Security Department, later Soviet security, reports. There are simply hundreds of pages characterizing how these relations have deteriorated at the everyday level and among residents.

I agree that it is very important to look for documents and sources in archives which were inaccessible before or which were simply overlooked. And there are some sources in the USA, at Stanford University in California, the Lithuanian Activist Front documents in Edvardas Turauskas’s collection, etc.

I’d like to underline another problem about which we spoke earlier. One problem with the Western narrative on Lithuanian history is that the majority of Western academics do not know the local languages and hundreds of thousands of pages of archival documents which became accessible after restoration of independence are inaccessible to them. This is a big minus. This gives rise to many myths at times. About the number of deported, the nature of deportations, the structures [agencies] of the Lithuanian Communist Party, how many insurgents there was, and so on. Some of the myths were created by the émigré community, others arose in other ways. Only now, it seems to me, is this narrative beginning to change in our favor somewhat, in the sense that the narrative of the Lithuanian past might be accepted as well.

One thing I’d like to point out is that Katz, Zuroff et al., they want to force their narrative alone on us. And if we correct that narrative, we become the bad guys. I would like to think it’s possible to adopt certain principles by which we could not only accurately, honestly and thoroughly study the tragedy of the Jews, but at the same time we could spread our own narrative as well. These narratives are not mutually opposed, if we work conscientiously. [the transcript says “But that will happen if we work conscientiously and dare accept certain unpleasant facts about the participation of Lithuanians in the holocaust,” which wasn’t in the interview.]

Ohmanas: The effects of the actions of people make history. Talking about education I want to say this. What should a child know? I can name several people whom, I think, youth should know. The first person is Juozas Lukša. He was the resistance leader, a Lithuanian hero, a fantastic person. Another person: Antanas Impulevicius, the chief of the 12 police battalion who in Belarus and also in Lithuania “worked” on the Jewish question. The third is Juozas Krikštaponis. He was a partisan leader, stubbornly fought the Soviets after the war, but was also an officer [military sense] in a police battalion. These are three people, kinds of examples, whom, I think, children should know something about.

Valiusaitis: Can we compare the governments of Justas Paleckis and Juozas Ambrazevicius? Should both be considered puppets, or are there differences between them?

Makauskas: I wouldn't compare them. There were different goals and different opportunities of choice here. In Paleckis's case, the burial of independence in the classical sense. Collaboration was chosen. I think Paleckis from the very beginning couldn't even imagine the depths to which he himself and the state would have to fall. This is demonstrated by Vincas Kreve-Mickevicius as well. People living next to Soviet Russia didn't have a deeper understanding of what was happening in Russia. In protest of the domestic situation in Lithuania, which had its own problems, and led by a certain personal egotism, [these] people thus chose to bury their own state.

In Ambrazevicius's case the situation was the opposite: the ideal was to restore the state. Manipulating the life-and-death struggle of the totalitarian regimes, they attempted to declare independence. A group of people declare the ideal, but are not able to carry it out. And all the side effects connected with it: Soviet contribution [?], emotions, agencies... Lithuania was always a grateful theater for their activity. Attempts to seek compromise cost dearly. [these two paragraphs above seem to have been reordered in the transcript, Makauskas puts the sentences in a different order in the radio interview, although the audio file is also edited]

The historian has to weigh well these questions and answer honestly, to analyze all the accessible documents, but politicians and journalists sometimes attempt to use historical facts taken out of context as a political tool, in this way seeking political capital through interpretation. We collide with a sort of front of political interpretations. And here honest journalists and honest politicians need to come to the aid of the historian. But such an ideal variation is rarely in [real] life. Most often, the historian simply has to fight alone in his field.

These matters are complex. I think if the state were concerned with historical politics [or "history policy"] and a more honest presentation of thought, it would be more concerned, would allocate more funds to studies, stipends, programs which seek to elucidate and present those complex but important topics and problems appropriately.