

## Opinion.

# Just About Yiddish? The Real Story Behind This Week's Yivo Banquet in New York



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It is never pleasant to interrupt festivities, least of all in the festive season. But when these are themselves instruments of warped foreign policy, it behooves us to draw the issues to wider attention.

This Wednesday, December 17, veteran U.S. diplomat Anne E. Derse will receive an award in New York City at a “business attire only” banquet. Her many achievements as a successful career diplomat duly merit that she be honored. We wish her and her family only the very best in the years ahead.

The question is, why is she receiving the “Leadership Award” from the Yivo Institute of Jewish Research, a private Jewish institution dedicated to the Yiddish language? The Yivo Institute was founded some 90 years ago here in Vilna (then Polish Wilno, today Vilnius, the beautiful capital of Lithuania) to build an academic infrastructure to enable the flourishing of the stateless Yiddish language. Through the inspiring dedication of a modest number of extraordinary people, it was one of the few pre-war secular Yiddish institutions in Eastern Europe to reestablish itself in the United States.

First, Ambassador Derse’s record on the relevant issues during her tenure as the American ambassador in Vilnius (2009-2012). Shortly after her appointment in 2009, the U.S. embassy’s long-standing policy of speaking out with dignity for American values on a whole host of issues was inexplicably terminated. These issues include: state-enabled neo-Nazi marches in major cities on independence day; front-page outrages in major dailies, including senseless hate-grade humiliation of the local Chabad rabbi; efforts by prosecutors to criminalize Holocaust survivors who survived by joining the anti-Nazi resistance; state-sponsored efforts to glorify local Nazi collaborators, including actual war criminals, as “anti-Soviet heroes.” As for the freedom to speak out about all this without fear of retribution — a core American and European Union value — there was, on Ambassador Derse’s watch and with no public comment from her embassy, legislation and prosecutorial action to diminish free speech to speak out on just these issues.

Incidentally, none of this reflects on the delightful, hard-working, and welcoming

people of Lithuania. It reflects on the ultra-nationalist far-right elements in positions of authority in government, academia, media, and the arts, and their continued mischief that cries out for a robust response. Indeed, the most powerful and moving voices of dignified protest have come from valiant Lithuanian citizens themselves. Maybe, one day, some of them will also win awards at business-attire banquets in New York City.

One of the first people outside Lithuania to notice that “We have a problem” was Dr. Efraim Zuroff, chief Nazi hunter at the Simon Wiesenthal Center. In an April 2010 op-ed in the *Guardian*, he correctly found the new ambassador’s remarks following the outrage of yet another neo-Nazi march in the capital’s center to be “particularly shocking.” But there were bigger shocks still to come.

When, in 2012, the Lithuanian government repatriated, for reburial with full honors, the remains of its 1941 Nazi puppet prime minister, who signed papers ordering the Jews of Kovno (Kaunas) to a death camp and a ghetto, the U.S. embassy, instead of politely protesting, helped the far-right nationalist establishment cover it all up with a Holocaust symposium the very same week (and day). When the clamor for comment became irresistible amidst the mounting scandal, the U.S. ambassador issued a statement not in keeping with American values — and national patriotic memory — but in morally lame doublespeak that noted the Nazi collaborators’ support for a local (and sham) “declaration of independence.” To put it in local political terms, our embassy was supporting the far-right nationalists while offering no encouragement to moderates.

It is not possible here to cover all the incidents, which someone will one day research as a catalogue of how the Obama State Department has been enabling far-right East European establishments to rewrite Holocaust history in a way that provides for the rehabilitation and glorification of the perpetrators of the worst genocide in human history.

Perhaps the most unethical act of all on Ambassador Derse’s watch was the embassy’s 2011 offer of a generous grant to a Montreal based Summer Literary Seminars (SLS) program on condition that Dr. Efraim Zuroff be dropped from the roster of speakers (he was). The following year, a Jewish organization invited him to Vilnius, resulting in a friendly, open-hearted, tolerant and enlightening session with young people of all backgrounds speaking about the issues as befits a mature democracy.

A close-second (or first?) for most unethical act of the embassy during the Obama-Derse years entailed mobilizing young

Fulbright scholars as attack dogs to undermine those who would dare question Lithuanian government Holocaust policy. It is something they will have to live with as they grow to maturity and independence of thought.

Let us hasten to add that the good Ambassador Derse cannot be blamed for the unethical shift in Holocaust policy when the Obama Administration took over in 2009. While she deserves no honors on the Jewish side of things, she deserves no special opprobrium for following orders.

Her actions are part of the Obama Administration’s grand strategy to minimize the Holocaust, for a complex of reasons that requires further study. One motivation is crystal clear: to bring rapid gratification to allied, anti-Russia nationalist East European politicians who are hard at work twisting the history to minimize their nations’ collaboration, to recast their countries as pure victims, to turn Holocaust criminals into national heroes, and to subtly pave the way for continuation of antisemitic tropes about all Jews being communists.

As a further example, there was the startling record of President Obama’s U.S. envoy on anti-Semitism who ended up doing more to cover it up in Eastern Europe than to stand up against it with a modicum of moral backbone.

2014 was the year the rot became evident back home in Washington DC, even if the media has been slow to pick up on it. Three of the most painful examples should suffice to illustrate the ethical deterioration. Last May, Baltic nationalist groups succeeded in getting through the U.S. Congress, under the radar and without any public scrutiny, support for the proposed mix-and-match jumbled day of remembrance for both Nazi and Soviet victims as demanded by the Prague Declaration.

Then, Michigan Congressman John Conyers’ amendment, that would have restricted U.S. military aid to Ukrainian units that openly profess neo-Nazism and wave swastikas, was mysteriously sunk. Last and perhaps most damaging, the United States was one of three countries that just last month voted against a UN resolution calling for “combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism, and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.” The other two countries, by the way, were Ukraine and Canada (with its large Ukrainian nationalist lobby).

The bridge between the Obama State Department and East European far-right Holocaust revisionism is in the end rather simple, and maybe best explained in State Department street talk: “The only people with the backbone to stand up to Putin are the nationalists in Eastern Europe, and if they want some changes in the history books about this or that Holocaust, who the hell cares.”

To cover for the new policy, East European nationalist governments and the Obama officials at State have invested heavily in “Useful Jewish Idiots” (UJIs colloquially) — Jewish folks who don’t know or care to know what’s actually flying, and are very pleased

Jewish ex-cop who started his own agency to monitor and expose anti-Semitic incidents, Brenner provided fascinating insight into the class divisions that streak the French Jewish community. Among her cast of characters, there was the working class, Algerian-born



Auschwitz Entrance. Photo: Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum.

with honors, medals, and fun-trips to the East European playground. The amazing comment of a leader of the American Jewish Committee cited in a recent *Jerusalem Post* article can only be fathomed, sad to say, in light of the medals and awards he has received from right-wing nationalist Lithuanian politicians. Incidentally, he too is on the roster of speakers at next Wednesday’s banquet in the Big Apple.

And that takes us to a narrower component of Wednesday evening’s gala awards benefit banquet at Yivo in New York City. For decades, a series of leaders of Yivo has stood up with moral fortitude to the Lithuanian government’s efforts to hijack the prestigious Yivo brand as made-in-heaven cover for Holocaust revisionism. But when the current director, who doesn’t (yet) know Yiddish, took over, they lucked out bigtime. Starting with a misguided 2011 event honoring a foreign minister known for anti-Semitic outbursts, he went on to circulate memos turning the once-great (and hopefully again-to-be-great) institute into a PR office for the Lithuanian consulate in New York. He issued memos trashing Holocaust survivors who disagreed, he came to Vilnius for the State Department’s 2012 symposium to camouflage the reburial of the 1941 Nazi puppet prime minister, and this past September he placed a Holocaust remembrance wreath at Ponár (Paneriai), the mass murder site outside Vilnius, not with Holocaust survivors but with two fellow members of the state’s “red-brown commission” whom he publicly joined.

Yivo’s core values include absolute and unambiguous rejection of all efforts to excuse, rehabilitate, or glorify Nazism and its collaborators, no matter what those collaborators’ position was about the Soviet Union and Russia. Those core values include rejection of the racism and antisemitism that are part and parcel of right-wing nationalist movements. Those core values, by the way, include a permanent American historic pride in the grand coalition and huge American-British-Soviet sacrifice that brought down Nazi Germany and ended the Holocaust.

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Ghozlan, who spent his career fighting criminals in the bleak outskirts of Paris; there was the aristocrat David de Rothschild, a banker with a haute-bourgeois lifestyle who gave

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## Ominous Clouds Over French Jewry



BEN COHEN/ JNS.ORG  
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It’s an article that’s more than 10 years old now, but I still maintain that anyone who wants to get an insight into the dynamics of anti-Semitism in France would do well to consult “France’s Scarlet Letter,” published by the journalist Marie Brenner in the June 2003 edition of *Vanity Fair*.

In that superlative piece, which had at its core a profile of Sammy Ghozlan, the