

Dovid Katz / June 2005 /

Statement to the Committee Considering Dr. Sarunas Liekis's Habilitation

Greetings, esteemed colleagues. I am honored to have been included in this committee and hasten to thank you, and in the first instance, to apologize for my poor Lithuanian. But before turning to English, I do want to say a few words.

Our habilitation candidate, Dr. Sarunas Liekis, is even today very young (at least as far as some of the rest of us are concerned!) but when I met him a decade and a half ago, in late 1990, during my first trip to Vilnius, he was younger still, which is to say, as an old Yiddish expression goes, that "water is wet"! And, our first conversation, during those dark days of the Soviet embargo here, turned to his possible future as a specialist in Lithuanian Jewish history of the 20th century in what we both dreamed would be a free and democratic and modern Lithuania.

I lamented to him then, as I continue to lament to my students today, that the historians who read primary sources in Yiddish and Hebrew, and the secondary scholarly literature in English, often do not even know about the existence of sources in Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian and Russian, let alone study them. And vice versa. For scholars in today's East Central Europe, learning to read two Jewish languages, Yiddish and Hebrew, can seem daunting, and it is a lot easier to take the lazy way out and ignore them and viskas, and proclaim oneself "an expert in Jewish history" in places where nobody else seems to read them either.

On both sides of the divide, the one-sided use of "certain sets of languages" usually goes hand in hand with latent (and very often not-so-latent!) national pride, nationalism, mono-ethnic loyalty and apologetics, and disdain for the other cultures, languages, peoples and nations in the region. Ignoring the sources written in the "Language of the Other" seems to work rather well for historical reconstructions that are not in the voice of the international historian seeking truth, but in the voice of the ethno-national, ethno-centric "We": We are always right, we are the victims of evil history, everyone around us has abused us, and so on and so forth. From this point of view, Lithuanian historical conferences, and Jewish historical conferences might seem eerily similar to an observer from China or Taiwan, or Mars.

Although my own field is Yiddish linguistics, I pressed on this aspiring young Lithuanian historian in Vilnius fifteen years ago the need first to master the sources in Yiddish and Hebrew for his proposed specialization—Lithuanian Jewish history. To my delight and surprise, he not only accepted this idea wholeheartedly but went a step further in his response to me at the time. He expressed his profound wish to study with and one day work closely and sincerely with historians and professors hailing from the various (often mutually non-communicative) national groupings which have produced historians of the tragic and complex twentieth century history of East-Central Europe.

Meeting with you here today, I am so deeply gratified that in all of Lithuania, this was the one aspiring specialist in the field who went to Oxford University to complete a one-year graduate program in Judaic Studies in addition to a number of intensive Yiddish language summer courses at Oxford; who went to Brandeis University in Massachusetts in the United States for four years to complete his doctorate in Lithuanian Jewish history; and who spent a year in Israel in postgraduate study of Jewish history with that country's top masters in the field at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and... , and... and... after all that, who came back to settle here in Lithuania and to build this field here in Vilnius.

Dr. Liekis has earned his Habilitation by contributing a series of in-depth studies, based entirely on wherever the sources led him (not on preconception, sentiment or the wish to please anybody!) on a number of central issues that together form a complete, unique and coherent whole: the period of Jewish autonomy during the early years of the interwar Lithuanian republic; the history of the year 1939; the dynamics of interrelationships between the ethnicities of southeastern Lithuania in the decade from 1939 to 1949; and not least, the bearing of all the foregoing on the construction of tolerant, mutually respectful multicultural societies in the 21st century, highlighted by the candidate's successful years as director of the civil society program of Atviros Lietuvos fondas: understanding the interplay of in-depth specialization in history and the construction of a more tolerant and mature Europe.

In the years ahead, Professor Liekis will continue, cautiously, step-by-step, with recourse to sources in all the relevant languages, to cover the remaining chapters of Lithuanian-Jewish history in the modern era. At the same time, he will help build a center for the study of Jewish and multicultural history in Lithuania that will be a pride to his university and state, and to the European Union.

Thank you.