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Breaking the comfortable silence on the Holocaust

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A book review of *Mūsų šaliai* (*Ours*). By: Rūta Vanagaitė. Publisher: Alma littera, Vilnius, 2016.

What makes Rūta Vanagaitė's *Ours* (*Mūsų šaliai*) very different from all other Lithuanian books on the Holocaust is that it was from the start written as a bestseller. Written by an experienced public relations professional as an appeal to the Lithuanian public, the book raises the painful issue of historical responsibility. The author does not refrain from giving a personal twist to the story (it would be impossible otherwise, as the Holocaust is an issue of individual position and individual responsibility). The author is piercingly direct and uses black comedy. She approaches the topic with composure and a sense of supremacy. These two features may irritate the reader. However, she is entitled to it as she aims to confront the reader, which she so eloquently achieves.

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A book for the common people

Vanagaitė's companion on this journey to darkness, Efraim Zuroff, has described the character of this book in the following way: "you have told me that in Lithuania all has been written about the Holocaust, but nothing has been read. That's why this book is so important. This book will make the truth discovered by historians accessible to most of the people, because it will be a book for the common people. And about the common people". Vanagaitė addresses those "good Lithuanians" whose "families never took part in the Holocaust and did not know any Jews", and those who did not steal their possessions, and those who were born after the Holocaust and thus did not have anything to do with it. The harsh reaction to the book online shows that it (now in its 4th edition) has been, and will be, read.

Since independence in 1990 the Holocaust discourse has not received such straightforward publicist appeal. The discussion existed, but mostly at an academic level while the broader public discourse was too cautious, slightly conformist and thus ineffective. It did not oppose the government that merely simulated Holocaust remembrance, in reality accepting silence. The government is building a new national ideology and it does not even encourage society to cleanse itself. Public opinion is not strong enough to condemn antisemitic attitudes inspired by the tabloid press and public institutions (one example could be the allegations of war crimes committed by Jewish partisans). It is not the fear that still haunts witnesses of those events; rather it is weariness and frustration since all civic initiatives have in the end been institutionalised and stifled.

Historical gaps and distortions are not a cure to the trauma of the Holocaust. The only way to recovery is through recognition of the horrible truth of the massacres of Lithuanian Jews, atonement and condemnation of the murderers, without any excuse about the inhuman historical circumstances. Vanagaitė invites her readers to openly accept this truth, stressing that her book is based on the work of Lithuanian historians and other works published in Lithuanian, including archival sources – and without any influence from the outside. When we talk openly and directly the emerging picture is less than pleasing. The wartime efforts to get on with Adolf Hitler have meant that most of Lithuanian Jews were killed by their neighbours. We can endlessly discuss the terrible time, general confusion, shock of Stalinist terror and the dream of national independence in the minds of the remaining elite. But it does not change what happened.

The Nazis harnessed these illusions, the antisemitic moods, and played the Judeo-Bolshevik card. The Kazys Škirpa's Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), founded in Germany and assisted by its military intelligence, was expanding its network of collaborators, spreading Nazi antisemitic propaganda and preparing for the uprising that was planned and launched at the same time as the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, and was marked by the first pogroms of Jews. The LAF formed a provisional government which declared the restoration of Lithuanian independence. It sent a letter to Hitler in gratitude for “the liberation of Lithuania from the devastating Jewish and Bolshevik occupation” and expressed hope that the Lithuanian nation will have its place in the victorious march towards “the new European order”.

Murderers with a human face

Even though the provisional government did everything to gain its favour, Germany did not recognise it. It used it for its own ends and finally ordered its dissolution on August 5th 1941. However, the consequences of the provisional government were tragic. The government passed (or was forced to pass) antisemitic legislation, approved the opening of a concentration camp, and under German pressure reorganised June Uprising troops into a police battalion (the National Labour Service) which committed massacres of Jews at the Kaunas 7th Fortress on August 1st and rubberstamped racist laws titled “the Jewish status/state regulation”.

The worst followed the retirement of the government that it did not order its restored administration, local government and police to disband – thus consigning them to the role of executioners in the Holocaust. The Nazis would have found helpers themselves as there were also shtetls where the Jews were exterminated autonomously. However, with the assistance of local government officials it was much easier to organise the killings: drive the Jews to the ghettos, guard them, transport them and finally kill them. This assistance resulted in the emergence of those subordinate men, whom Vanagaitė has called “murderers with a human face”.

“Are we responsible for our history?” is the rhetorical and openly ironic question put forward by Vanagaitė as a commentary to what is also the title of a chapter in a history textbook for high school children. It is hard to imagine a contemporary democratic society that does not understand such responsibility. Unfortunately in Lithuania this understanding is hampered by a nationalist narrative that treats the June Uprising and the Provisional

Government's Declaration of Independence as an act of defiance against the Bolsheviks. The line between resistance and collaboration has been blurred.

“The collaborationist character of the Provisional government already revealed itself in the June 25th appeal to the Lithuanian nation which suggested that a ‘permanent government would be formed following the clarification of the conditions of co-operation with Germany’. In other words, in accordance with the will of Germany, but not the will of its own citizens” such is the conclusion of the historian Alfonsas Eidintas based on Zenonas Rekašius 1999 article, in the Lithuanian magazine *Akiračiai* edited in US. This merits a comment. Rekašius was inspired to write the article after an initiative in the Lithuanian Parliament proclaimed the Provisional Government as the continuation of Lithuanian independence which, according to the author, could “bog Lithuania down in the glorification of the mistakes of 1941”. On the basis of the abovementioned appeal to the nation, Rekašius claims that the offer to relinquish part of its sovereignty cannot be explained in terms other than as a wish to be a German satellite. Germany, however, was not inclined to grant even that much. The author discusses the model of single party dictatorship chosen by the LAF, in which there is no place for citizens from other nationalities as well as the Provisional Government's declaration aimed at moving away from “the bad regime that existed before June 15th 1940”. Rekašius also notes that post-war émigré Lithuanian representative (the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania) completely dissociated itself from the Provisional Government.

Acting rationally

Sadly, there are also other voices among the émigrés. For example, the director of the Chicago Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, Augustinas Izdelis, has compared the lack of attention given to Jews by the Provisional Government to emergency triage: “The injured are divided into groups: those who have a chance of survival and those who cannot be saved. One thus has to act rationally. Without any prejudice to one group or another. According to capabilities and means”. It is hard to believe that these words are coming from the free world more than 60 years after the emigration. Nevertheless, we have to remember that even the idea of a double genocide was developed by the émigrés and then successfully planted in independent Lithuania.

There are more such quotes in the book. Especially cynical is the calculation given by the young historian Nerijus Šepetys, who encouraged Vanagaitė to start writing her book: “Those who took part in the murder of our Jews were mainly Lithuanians. So what? Let's list them, or even better, let's write their biographies disclosing their typical traits, but let's not our Jews over to Nazi hunters, such as Zuroff, or defenders of history, such as Dovid Katz. Because of them our Jews who lived and died are just instruments”. That is when they become “ours” – our Jews: once they have been murdered and their memory expropriated.

The lists suggested by the historian have a clear political motivation. Once the final list of the Holocaust's perpetrators is published we can say that the question of responsibility has been solved. What is more, this list can be compared to a list of those who saved or rescued Jews – and then using

the symmetry principle, one can contentedly state that the latter were more numerous. This is the most common and sordid form of manipulation that tries to minimise the scale of the crime at the cost of those who risked their lives.

However, this list, which has been commissioned and compiled, will never be completed. Historians interviewed by Vanagaitė allege that it would only be more or less possible if a group of researchers were to work for at least five years in Lithuanian archives and the archives in other countries. But this is not the case. The Holocaust in Lithuania was so brutal and explicit that it touched everyone and left a permanent psychological trauma, which was then subdued under communism and reopened after independence.

Loaded with memories

The second part of the book documents Vanagaitė's gloomy trips around execution sites. A trip to the present day takes one to another world which is very near. Those are the forests and bushes on the outskirts of every city and shtetl. Sometimes one wanders deeper into the heart of the forest. Those sites have been abandoned and are rarely visited. Only small granite posts, funded by the British Holocaust Educational Trust, mark the way. Some have been smashed in an act which requires great hatred and a large hammer. The 2011 Holocaust in Lithuania Atlas, published by the National Vilnius Gaon Jewish Museum, lists 227 recognised mass graves. But if we look at Marcelijus Martinaitis's memoirs, cited by Vanagaitė, or consider the recent discovery of human bones near Šiauliai, there should be more. Do we ever reflect on the fact that we walk the land where the most terrible modern genocide was committed? And that we are separated from this time by only two generations. Or is it deliberate amnesia?

This ideological abyss is best reflected in the Universal Lithuanian Encyclopaedia and its ambiguous title. It contains maps of all the districts with carefully marked "Death Sites", "Memory Sites" and "Memorials" of Lithuanian partisans, but not a single mention of the Holocaust. To be fair, the first volumes published in 2001-2004 have some of the murders sites as cemeteries of victims of the Nazi occupation or the Jewish genocide. Yet in the later volumes, they simply disappear.

On her trip Vanagaitė encountered some baffling things: the fear witnesses still feel despite their old age, and the complete indifference or absolute ignorance of some. It is a difficult psychological complex that can be better understood after reading Zygmunt Bauman's interview given to Rasa Rimickaitė for IQ magazine: "both those who fed, helped, saved the Jews and those who had private reasons to report them and those who murdered and those who survived, they all have a hunchback. We are loaded with memories. When a neighbour was being dragged out of the house, the others watched. All of them, Poles, Lithuanian and even Jews live under a pressure of their conscience. And neither they, nor their children and grandchildren can appease the guilty conscience."

Ignorance thrives on silence. A generation ignorant of the Holocaust can grow up in ten years. I have in mind this practice of speaking without saying, which is present in schoolbooks and local history museums. Vanagaitė shares her impression from the visits she made to those institutions where “all the publications use the same impersonal form ‘Švenčionys Jewish community was destroyed in the forest near Švenčionėliai on the October 7th and 8th 1941’ ... ‘they were herded’... ‘executioners killed the children with indifference’ ... Who herded? Who killed?’”

This convenient impersonal form is used as a norm in the above-mentioned encyclopaedia: the Jews of this or that Lithuanian shtetl have been murdered by the orders of the occupational Nazi German government”.

Multiple mistakes

To the official Lithuanian state ideology the Holocaust is an unsolvable issue. It always overshadows the national myth of Lithuanian innocence, martyrdom, resistance and heroism. Stained with the blood of their Jewish co-citizens the national ideology was morally bankrupt in 1941 (which the contemporaries did not understand), but then returned independent Lithuania. It returned having integrated some features of the Soviet ideology – the hero cult and rewriting of history. Such are the origins of those posthumous colonels, general and even presidents as well as streets named after Kazys Škirpa or the June Uprising and monuments to murderers.

Nationalist ideology does not recognise its own mistakes, but it multiplies them. The first and gravest mistake was made in 1991 when the state rehabilitated all members of the anti-Soviet resistance, including those who took part in the Holocaust (some shrewd historians would say they were sentenced with evidence fabricated by the NKVD). Has this mistake been set right? On the contrary, the criticism thrown at Lithuania stirred opposition. There were the acquittals of Aleksandras Lileikis and Kazys Gimžauskas, extradited from the US on war crimes. There was plenty of patriotic gestures accompanied by a double-genocide theory which claims that the Jews were responsible for the mass deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia and that brought about their own doom.

Constant effort and political will is needed to change social consciousness. In the 25 years since independence, only President Algirdas Brazauskas has shown such political will, publically apologising in the Knesset – for which he was condemned by public opinion in Lithuania. It is symptomatic that the Holocaust obfuscation is applied by all political parties in Lithuania, not only conservatives, but social democrats and liberals alike. This comfortable silence expresses the electorate’s fears and the convictions of the political elite. And, moreover, the emigrating intellectual elite are too weak to break this silence.

Vanagitė's book is an example of brave speech. She has kicked up dust that will only settle over the graves. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the book will open the eyes of many young people and help break the ice of ignorance and indifference. It encourages us to think and look for an answer to a question posed in the epilogue by the priest, Ričardas Doveika – what has happened that we have become victims of a new state ideology?

Translated by Laurynas Vaičiūnas

Linas Vildžiūnas is a Lithuanian film critic and journalist.

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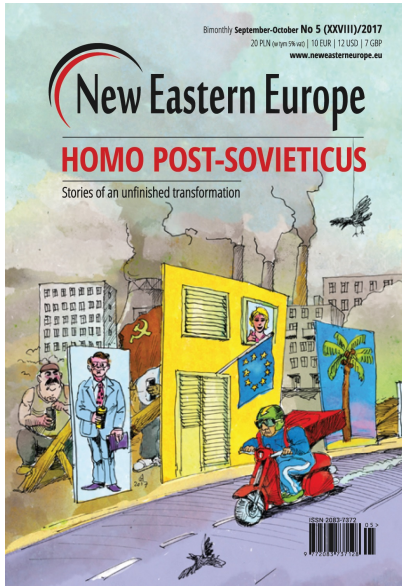
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