

THE REVOLT OF JUNE 1941 AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE JEWS OF LITHUANIA

The freethinking monthly "Akiračiai" ("Horizons"), which reflects the attitudes of the progressive Lithuanian intellectual elite, published an analytical article by Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS, entitled "Topical themes of 20th C. Lithuanian History" (2009, Nr.2-3). The article thoroughly reviews publications from the last twenty years, and especially ones related to the Second World War. Since part of the article, under the heading "The June 1941 revolt and the tragedy of Lithuania's Jews", examines how the theme of the Holocaust is treated in Lithuanian historiography, and refers to the evaluation of the role of the Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) and the actions of Kazys Škirpa during the Second World War, and because arguments related to these issues continue both in Lithuania and among its emigrant population, the "J of L" takes this opportunity to offer it to its readers.

Since the beginning of independence, "Akiračiai" has given much recognition to the revolt of 1941, and to the Holocaust, a topic which had not yet been discussed. The cornerstone article, or more accurately, interview with emigre historian Saulius Sužiedėlis, was printed in 1991 (Nr. 9-10) and 1992 (Nr.1). The "Akiračiai" editorial office admitted that it was "accustomed to present [the 1941 revolt] only in bright colours", and at the same time indicated that it had its dark sides: the political naivete of the heads of the revolt; the unfounded hope in the Nazi Reich; the acts of revenge and licence that happened during the revolt, and the start of the killing of Lithuania's Jews; the beginnings of a flirtation with Nazi Germany by some of the LAF activists once the Germans occupied Lithuania.

The editors noted that these issues are reflected in documents found in USA archives (primarily referring to the fund of former Lithuanian diplomat Edvardas Turauska).

"Akiračiai" invited Saulius Sužiedėlis to examine the documents and to answer several questions about these events. At the time, the historian was writing an extensive historical work about Lithuania during the Second World War, and in 1991 was collecting research material also in Lithuania.

For the first time in historiography, S.Sužiedėlis brought a wider light to the mentioned "white stains" of the 1941 events, including the massive Holocaust of the Jews of Lithuania. The historian singled out two painful issues: how the LAF imagined liberated Lithuania's economic and political relations with the Reich, and how much the ideology of nationalism, and fascist ideas in general, affected the attitude of Lithuanian activists.

In this interview, the "Akiračiai" editorial office and S.Sužiedėlis for the first time publicly questioned the credibility of "Sukilimas" ("Revolt"), a book written by the emigrant former LAF leader Kazys Škirpa.

During the discussion it became clear that individual sections in K.Škirpa's book on the LAF's planned fate for Lithuania's Jews, and its radical anti-Semitic attitudes, had been crossed out of a cited document entitled "Instructions for freeing Lithuania". S.Sužiedėlis presented several other similar examples, and added that, "we have even more examples of the 'cleaning up' of text and reality". E.g., the introduction to a collection entitled "Lithuanian arch-

ives: Bolshevik years", edited in 1952, states that in some places, "one or another sentence was omitted" due to the abnormal conditions, i.e., by the German occupation. According to the historian, what in fact was removed was anti-Semitic material that had ended up in the publication during the German period.

Returning to K.Škirpa's book "Sukilimas", S.Sužiedėlis admitted that K.Škirpa had omitted entire sentences, including all instructions urging that anti-Jewish actions be taken in case of war ("Not even omission dots were used to indicate the parts of the text that were taken out."). The historian was shocked at the discovery: "It is somehow easier to understand when an author decides for some reason not to publish a compromising document, but to 'clean up' a document and then to present it to the public as important, authentic material - that, readers will have to judge for themselves."

S.Sužiedėlis admitted: "One of the problems in judging Kazys Škirpa's activities is the fact that it was... K.Škirpa himself who mostly wrote about the activities of the head of the LAF."

During the interview it became clear that emigrant and former head of the provisional Lithuanian government, Juozas Ambrazevičius, had acted in a manner similar to K.Škirpa. In his book "Vienų vieni" ("All on our own"), he consciously did not include an entire excerpt from a document entitled "An appeal to the nation by the Lithuanian Provisional Government", issued on June 25, 1941. The author of the book totally removed the part which glorifies A.Hitler, without noting the omission.

S.Sužiedėlis came to certain conclusions in his interview: "In comparing the existing documentation in the archives with a great deal of the history of Lithuania during the war period that continues to be proclaimed in Lithuania even now, I be-

came convinced that we are still quite removed from an open look at the past. (...) I venture to confirm that the summer of 1941 is the very bloodiest period in the recent history of Lithuania. I know of no other period when so many unarmed people would have been killed during such a short time."

The "Akiračiai" interview with S.Sužiedėlis in fact meant a breaking-point in Lithuanian historiography regarding the evaluation of the June 1941 revolt. For probably the first time, the tragedy of the Lithuanian Jews wasn't simply the focus of a great deal of attention. What was most important was the beginning of an understanding that a part of the Lithuanian nation, including authority figures like K.Škirpa, had contributed to it [the tragedy - transl.]

Each year brought new "discoveries". The second 1994 "Akiračiai" number presented documents about the June 1941 revolt, and specifically included a printed version of a radio broadcast, an "Appeal to the Lithuanian people", authorized by the chief of LAF headquarters to be delivered by Leonas Prapuolenis in Kaunas. A document, as well as declaring the restoration of Lithuania's independence, states the following: "Before the pure conscience of the entire world, the young state of Lithuania enthusiastically promises to join in the organizing of Europe along new foundations. Worn out by the cruel Bolshevik terror, the Lithuanian nation is determined to create its future on the basis of national unity and social justice." Alongside it is the "Appeal to the Lithuanian people" announced on the same day by L.Prapuolenis, which declares close ties between the restored Lithuanian state and Nazi Germany. The following is a brief extract: "Welcome the marching German army with trust and the joy of gratitude, and give it your all-round support. Long live friendly relations

with Great Germany and its Leader Adolf Hitler!"

As noted by the "Akiračiai" editorial office, important documents from the June 1941 revolt, which are mentioned in works published by K.Škirpa and other participants in the events, are presented incomplete. The patriotic attitudes of the Lithuanian people are exposed, with no mention of anticipated close ties with the Germans.

Having received a cassette recording of these appeals from Balys Gražulis, and discovering that the emigre paper "Draugas" ("Friend") had refused to print a letter by B.Gražulis explaining the history of the documents recorded on the cassette, the "Akiračiai" editorial office was surprised that the LAF heirs, the "Frontists", "had not mentioned these texts. As if sticking one's head

under a sheet will make the ghosts of the past disappear, as if concealment and hiding are more useful to Lithuania than the truth."

There was more than one other article with new archival document commentaries on the theme of the June 1941 revolt. Which only confirmed the fears of the "Akiračiai" editorial office that the memoirs of participants in certain fateful events, e.g., those of former Minister of Industry with the Provisional Lithuanian Government Adolfas Damušis, differed from the truth.

In later years, there were other articles by historians on the theme of anti-Semitism, a lot of space given to anti-Semitism in Lithuania during the time of the Second World War, including in extracts from documents published in the press at that time.

Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Mr. Chersonskij,

My wife and I recently completed a trip to Lithuania and spent several days in Vilnius. While we were there, we met a member of the Vilnius Jewish Community Center who gave us a tour of your facility and gave us an English version of your publication "Jerusalem of Lithuania." In addition, he showed us the locations of the Vilnius Jewish Ghettos during World War II. His kindness was greatly appreciated.

Over the past several years, I have become a student of the holocaust and my wife and I have read numerous publications and watched videos, which detailed the atrocities committed against the Jewish people by the Nazis. The brutalities committed against the Jews in Lithuania, and Vilnius specifically, were especially heinous. One of the publications I have read which details the brutality in Lithuania is contained in the book The Unknown Black Book edited by Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman.

Since arriving home in the United States, I have read, with great appreciation, the April-June 2009 edition of "Jerusalem of Lithuania" many times. You are to be congratulated for this excellent newspaper. As a manifestation of my appreciation, I would like to become a sponsor of the publication. Therefore, I have enclosed a check for \$200.00. If you would be so kind, I would appreciate it if you would put me on your mailing list for future editions.

Should you, or any other member of your community, ever travel to the United States, my wife and I would be pleased to serve as guides and hosts.

I wish you the very best for the holidays, including a wonderful Hanukkah.

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Bruce K. Crockett, Ph.D.

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