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Jerusalem of Lithuania is Saddened

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Fear: Vilnius Jews see ever less tolerance in Lithuania and the day could come when Jews will be afraid to go outside. [Photo of Dr. Shimon Alperovich, elected head of the Jewish Community of Lithuania]

Shock, but not surprise. The Nazis flags that flew this week in Vilnius, a city of old known for its tolerance and multiculturalism, didn't ruin Passover, but did weaken the hope that Lithuanians might quickly rid themselves of antisemitic baggage.

“They can't even write correctly.”

“A bad fate threatens Lithuania. Nothing good comes from hate. What does green youth filled with hate know about ‘Juden raus’? They can’t even write it correctly,” Rachel Kostanian, an elderly curator of exhibits at the Jewish Museum [Holocaust exhibit at the Green House] in Vilnius, said with a sigh.

The woman who herself survived the horrors of war trembles when she sees the dwindling place left for tolerance and mutual respect in independent Lithuania. She says the day isn’t far off when the average Jew—only a few thousand live in Lithuania—will fear leaving the house.

“No one has attacked me yet. But, you know, the way things are going, anything could happen. Youth aren’t leaving Lithuania without a reason. It’s not just economic reasons that force them. I’m old now and I don’t have anywhere left to run,” Kostanian said.

Jews still in hiding

Chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish community Simon Alperovich said many Jews in Lithuania are afraid to declare their identities openly.

“I hope the census shows there are more Litvaks living in the country than the official statistics are saying today,” Alperovich said.

Jews warn that while politicians chase better ratings and the favor of votes, primitive antisemitism is thriving in Lithuania. The situation hasn’t yet descended to people pointing at Jews on the street, but a person seen with sidelocks or a traditional hat can expect frequently to hear laughing behind his back.

“To the nationalistically predisposed portion of the Lithuanian people, everyone who isn’t a Lithuania appears to be an enemy: Russians, Jews, Poles, Tatars. Everyone who isn’t with us is against us. The Lithuanian language is now considered the highest value, and exclusively so. A language shouldn’t be considered a value, but rather what is said in that language,” Kostanian remarked.

Frightened by swastikas

Doctor of history Renee Poznanski who traveled with her family to vacation in Vilnius said she experienced real shock when she learned of the Nazi symbols flying over the city.

“This is a horror, it’s terrible. I am so sorry that there are such people. I don’t understand how it happened. You have to educate children and young people so they know the tragic fate the Jews met and how horrible it is,” the historian said.

She said she had heard about increasingly frequent demonstrations by neo-Nazis in Lithuania recently, but didn’t change her travel plans because of it. She had heard earlier as well of antisemitic demonstrations but decided that such acts of vandalism are quickly dealt with in civilized countries.

Recommends improving education

Poznanski considers Vilnius first and foremost a city of Jewish historical and cultural heritage. The Jerusalem of the North which, she said, every Litvak living in the world should visit. Then there’s Austrian Jew Sebastian Pammer, who is doing volunteer work in our country, and who says Vilnius appears to him like post-war Austria, where surviving Jews were again marginalized.

The young man says he learned from the tales and lessons of his grandparents that Austrians at that time were perplexed and didn’t know on whom to vent their grievances over the deprivations they suffered during the war. That led to flourishing antisemitism everywhere. Nonetheless, politicians declared these things unacceptable and the modernized educational system revealed the entire tragedy of Jewish history [all the information from Sebastian Pammer above and below has been mistranslated and mis-edited, see my note at the end – Translator].

“I didn’t learn as much about Austria as I did about Jews. History is also taught in Lithuania but usually it’s dry facts completely removed from real life and so it doesn’t stay in people’s minds,” Sebastian said.

Poznanski, who teaches history at an Israeli university, also believes better educational programs would solve the problem of swastika graffiti. She thinks people who are well aware of this issue also understand how the idea of the Holocaust itself arose, and can't remain unconcerned by more than six million murdered Jews.

Patriotism and antisemitism

Pammer encountered the subculture of neo-Nazis calling themselves almost as soon as he arrived in Lithuania and began observing their growing marches through the streets of Vilnius. The Austrian thinks the people taking part in these marches are a mix of those who subscribe to patriotism, antisemitism and hatred of ethnic minorities.

“I saw the people marching on Gedimino Prospect on March 11th. It wasn't just antisemites, but also included those who sincerely believe they should be proud to be Lithuanian. Clearly national pride is fine, but it's bad that in Lithuania there are no limits to the nationalist idea. It is no longer clear where cherishing Lithuanian-ness ends and idolizing fascism begins. Some organizations mix these things together,” Pammer said.

Lack of responsibility by politicians

The young man said there are neo-Nazis in Austria but they never express their thoughts openly. They know that carries serious sanctions, primarily social condemnation. Antisemitism in public is not tolerated and inconceivable.

Pammer was shocked last October to hear foreign minister Audronius Azubalis's statements. Speaking on dual citizenship legislation he initially said that “everyone knows for whom this is beneficial,” and later blatantly pointed the finger at Jews: “This is mostly needed by Jews whose origins are in Lithuania.”

“Right-wing extremists exist, but in our country there is no differentiation into Austrians and Jews. We are all Austrian citizens. And we fight antisemitism with openness. Anyone who makes a statement against Jews is

publicly condemned. If our foreign minister had made a statement against Jews, his political career would be over,” the Austrian Jew said.

Harming the entire country

Lithuanian Jewish community chairman Alperovich said that swastikas or pigs’ heads left at a synagogue are not the highest tragedy for the Jewish community. The greatest harm is to Lithuania.

“There are many Litvaks in the world, including some influential people. Those who put up fascist symbols think they’re harming Jews, but really they’re harming Lithuania’s image,” he said.

Alperovich said the time has come not just for the police but for all responsible state institutions to demand these crimes be fully investigated and that the people who did them be apprehended.

[Translator’s note: the Lithuanian original suffered from mistranslations of English and over-editing, most likely by multiple hands. Sebastian Pammer is not an Austrian Jew, just an Austrian, and none of the statements attributed to him should be taken as his literal positions. Further, the gender of Renee Poznanski shifted from female to male midway through the original. The statements attributed to Rachel Kostanian and Simon Alperovich are most likely closer to what they actually said, in Lithuanian, to the author, who obviously cares enough about the subject to write the article and to talk to the appropriate people about the real issues, all mistakes and slips in editing aside.]