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Estonia and its Jews: An Ethical Dilemma

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Perception of the Second World War

The current position of the Jews in the Baltic states is to a considerable extent bound up with how the majority populations of these countries perceive the Second World War. For Jews, the issue is clear: Nazi Germany was the enemy and, even though the Soviet Union banned most forms of Jewish self-expression, Jewish survival depended on Germany's defeat by an Allied coalition that included the Soviets. For the Balts, the reverse is true. The Soviet Union was the enemy and the consequence of Germany's defeat was their subjection to four decades of Russian occupation. In Latvia and Estonia Soviet rule was accompanied by so extensive an influx of Russians and other Slavs into the national territory that the native people came close to losing their distinctive languages and culture.

As a consequence of this perception of the Second World War, those who resisted the Soviets are now national heroes, even if they did so in German uniform. Many of them were arrested and sent to camps or executed by the Soviets after the war. Immediately after the recovery of independence, there were massive rehabilitations, with scant regard for the nature of the charges. Jews who objected to this process have been accused of a lack of patriotism, or worse.¹

The intervention of outsiders, Jewish or otherwise, has tended to make things worse still. The world Jewish community has repeatedly protested the pardoning of Lithuanians who had been condemned after the war for crimes which included the murder of Jews. Lithuania has rather reluctantly agreed to reopen some of those cases but claims that it cannot afford such a massive research effort without funding.² The Estonian press attacked the Jewish

¹ Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution* (Yale 1993), 157; conversation with Gennady Gramberg, President of Estonian Jewish Community, Tallinn, December 1993.

² Private letter from an official of the Lithuanian parliament, April 1995.

community when a similar protest was believed (incorrectly) to have caused the Swedish government to consider withholding aid from Estonia unless the rehabilitations stopped.³

The sticking point for Jews is that in both Latvia and Lithuania— but, significantly, not in Estonia—the massacre or deportation of the Jewish community during the Holocaust was carried out with the active, and often enthusiastic, cooperation of significant segments of the local population. Local Jewish communities are a constant reminder of this uncomfortable fact. The leaders of Lithuania are only just beginning to deal with this moral dilemma. Prime Minister Adolfas Šleževičius (whose parents have been honoured for rescuing two Jewish families during the war) acknowledged in early 1995 that his nation bore responsibility for the actions of what he described as ‘hundreds’ of its citizens in collaborating in the murder of Jews during the war. In fact, the Lithuanians involved in such actions are to be numbered in the thousands. Inadequate as it was, Šleževičius’s statement, and a similar admission by President Algirdas Brazauskas during a visit to Israel several weeks later,⁴ were attacked in the Lithuanian press as ‘bowing down to Jewish pressure’.⁵

The Latvians have been less willing to reconsider their recent history. In 1993 Latvia’s ambassador to the United States was asked by a delegation from the American Jewish Committee about commemorations held for the Latvian SS. He claimed that the two divisions were not formed until after Latvia’s Jews had been murdered and that Latvians prefer to think of them not as SS units but as patriotic members of a Latvian legion formed to defend the homeland.⁶ This thinking persists: in March 1995 the last Inspector General of the Latvian SS, Rudolfs Bangerskis, was reburied in Riga with full military honours.⁷

The question of what the members of the Latvian SS had been doing before they signed up is left unasked and unanswered; many of them had, in fact, served in Nazi-organized police battalions or in the violently anti-Jewish Arajs Commando.

The current dilemma for the small Jewish communities in the Baltics is how to be loyal citizens of countries which once again define themselves in ethnic and nationalistic terms and are now free to regard themselves as major victims of the Second World War. The problem is how to remind them that respect for their status as victims may depend in part on an admission that

³ Lieven, 157.

⁴ Baltic Independent, March 1995.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Unpublished American Jewish Committee report, New York, December 1993.

⁷ Baltic Independent, April 1995.

many of their peoples played a prominent role in the Holocaust.

Formation of Estonian national consciousness

Nowhere is the original dilemma more sharply focused than in Estonia, for the simple reason that the Estonians, with very few exceptions, did not join in the massacre of their nation's Jews.

The Jewish community of Estonia has not been studied in any depth since the 1930s.⁸ It has always been very small, relatively assimilated, and generally unremarkable.

Accounts of the Baltic Jewish communities deal at length with Lithuania and Latvia and treat Estonia as a footnote.⁹ Its history, and the environment in which Estonia existed and now exists again, are closer to those of a Scandinavian community than to Eastern Europe. But the stresses on it today are emblematic of the rethinking of history which has followed the end of Soviet domination in the area.

Estonia's geographical position has given it the unenviable distinction of being trapped between northern Europe and Russia throughout its history.

Complications of the Estonian-Jewish relationship

The present-day relationship between Jews and Estonians is complicated by the fact that the Jews may be a reminder that Estonian arguments about their role in the Second World War are not as clear cut as they wish to believe. From the Jewish standpoint, the SS was a criminal organization. To the Estonians, its members were heroes. They have even been the subject of a small book praising their actions; the book was published in 1993 and written by former Prime Minister Mart Laar, although his authorship is not acknowledged.¹⁰

From the Jewish standpoint, the victory of Germany would have been a catastrophe. To the Estonians, there is an abiding belief that it could have given them an opportunity to restore their independence (ignoring German designs for the post-war Baltic). The Allied victory in fact meant Soviet

⁸ The only extant studies appear to be: K. Jokton, *Di Gesbikhte fun di Yidn in Estland* (The History of the Jews in Estonia) (1927) and N. Genss, *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Eesti*, 2 vols. (1933-7).

⁹ See, for example, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, where Lithuania is given 30 columns, Latvia 7, and Estonia 2; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) has 27 pages on Lithuania, 13 on Latvia; 'A note on Estonian Jewry' is less than 1 page.

¹⁰ *Eesti 1944* (Estonia 1944) (Tallinn: Kirjastus Olion, 1993) (no author cited).

occupation and the near-destruction of the Estonian people. Small wonder that Jews remain anxious to celebrate 9 May as the anniversary of the end of the Second World War, while Estonia's president has said that for Estonia the war came to an end only on 31 August 1994, the date of the withdrawal of the last Soviet troops from the country. How can such diverse views of the world co-exist comfortably?

The Jewish position on this issue is straightforward. The Nazis were a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people. It is clearly a moral act to enter into an alliance with anyone at all, to prevent that threat from becoming a reality.

This immediately sets the Jews on a collision course with the Balts. So far, there have been few attempts to solve the problem through some sort of dialogue. In the case of Lithuania, the gradual acknowledgment that Lithuanians killed Jews may be the beginning of a relaxation in the relationship, so that some understanding can be reached. The difficulty is that the Lithuanian government is clearly far ahead of popular opinion, which is not even ready for a calm discussion of the problem.¹¹

In Latvia there are some signs of progress, despite the reluctance of the government (and the people) to acknowledge responsibility for their wartime actions. The attack on the Riga synagogue at the time of the May 1995 commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe brought the President and Prime Minister of Latvia to the ceremony, which they had not originally planned to acknowledge. The Latvian press has also reported the comments of the leader of the Jewish community, Grigory Krupnikov, when he was asked about the pending deportation from Canada of a former member of the Latvian police battalions, on war crimes charges. He cited the need to counter historical amnesia, while maintaining rational vision: 'The distinction must be made between those who fought in combat against other armies and those who killed innocent civilians'.¹²

This is a distinction worth emphasizing. It would, on the face of it, appear to be easy in the case of Estonia, where the distinction is much clearer than elsewhere. Yet everything hinges on the willingness of the people concerned to understand both that the distinction is there and that it has meaning—in other words, on the acceptability to both sides that views of the same event are open to opposing interpretations and that the holding of an opposite view is not a disqualification from active and equal participation in the life of the

¹¹ Conversation with Emanuelis Zingeris, Honorary President of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, who accompanied President Brazauskas to Israel and monitored subsequent Lithuanian press coverage, May 1995.

¹² Baltic Independent, May 1995.

nation.

The problem for the Jews of Estonia is that acceptance of the distinction is hard to come by, if Estonians continue to believe, with some justification, that theirs was a 'separate war' and that they fought on the German side solely to defend the homeland. There is no reason to open discussions and a disincentive to seek an understanding of the Jewish position, if it could challenge Estonia's view of the morality of its people's wartime conduct.

Yet it is essential, if Jews are to be an integral part of the new Estonia, that some recognition be accorded to the view that the end of the war in Europe was the salvation of its surviving Jews. It is equally legitimate to argue that the end of the war in Europe was the start of forty-five years of tragedy for the Estonian people. The difficulty is to find a way to ensure that these positions are not mutually exclusive.