

## AN ATTEMPT BY THIRTEEN AUTHORS TO ANSWER THE QUESTION WHAT LITHUANIAN JEWS WERE (AND ARE)

*Lietuvos žydai: istorinė studija.* Sud. Vladas SIRUTAVIČIUS, Darius STALIŪNAS, Jurgita ŠIAUČIŪNAITĖ-VERBICKIENĖ. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2012. – 568 p. ISBN 978-9955-23-634-4

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The history of the Jews in Lithuania has been unique in the context of European Jewry, from the moment of the arrival of these oriental people to the appearance of the area called *Lita*. It is where the Gaon of Vilnius used to live, where a specific system of *Talmud-Tora* studies and yeshivas formed, and where the rationally pious Litvak differed from other Jews of East-Central Europe. Thanks to Judaic studies and the Jewish character, Vilnius was called *the Jerusalem of the North*, while all of interwar Lithuania, to quote the Jewish poet Chaim Bialik, was like the ‘Eretz-Ysrael de Galuta’ (The Land of Israel of the Exile).<sup>1</sup> After the First World War, a unique structure, Jewish national autonomy, emerged in Lithuania, and Lithuanian Zionists trained and concentrated their efforts for the colonisation of Palestine throughout the interwar period. Later, they were known for their sympathy for Lithuania. The traveller Antanas Poška, after meeting Jewish youth in Palestine, noted that they ‘had indeed grown in the true Lithuanian spirit, and they witnessed the most beautiful years of our national enthusiasm. In their hearts, they still cherished dear memories about Lithuania, their first Motherland, where they used to grow up and play, where their feelings matured, and where the most pleasant days of their infancy and childhood passed. They longed for Lithuania’s meadows and the songs in its fields ...’<sup>2</sup> The political opponents of Zionists, the right-wing religious Litvak movement *Agudat Jisrael*, gained influence in Palestine, and later in Israel. The final stage of the tragic history of the Jewish community in the Lithuanian ghettos and *shtetl* was also unique. Karl Jaeger’s report of 1 December 1941 to Berlin about the extermination of the Jews in Lithuania could have predetermined the resolution on *Endlösung* at Wannsee Lake.

The studies about the Jewish community in Lithuania that appeared after the restoration of independence have not been limited to the Holocaust, of which the tragic history frequently overshadows other issues of Jewish history, which, we can say, are gaining new momentum. In 2012, a new study on Lithuanian Jews appeared, written

<sup>1</sup> BERDICHEVSKY, N. The Baltic Revival and Zionism. *Lituanus*, 1992, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> POŠKA, A. *Judėjos slėniais ir aukštumomis* [Along Judea’s Valleys and Hills]. Vilnius, 1996, p. 63.

by a group of 13 authors from Lithuania (Darius Staliūnas, Vladas Sirutavičius, Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, Arūnas Bubnys, Larisa Lempertienė, Saulius Kaubrys and Gediminas Vaskela) and other countries (Samuel Barnai, David E. Fishman, Ruth Leiserowitz, Shaul Stampfer, Mordechai Zalkin, and Vladimir Levin).<sup>3</sup>

I once heard a joke at a conference in Jerusalem about how, in the interpretation of a difficult Talmudic issue, one rabbi spoke in such a sophisticated and philosophical way that few participants were able to understand him. The audience concluded that the rabbi must be very clever. Meanwhile, another rabbi approached the same text as if it was well known to everybody; however, he explained to the audience that the seeming simplicity hid the most difficult questions.

So how do conventional theories and concepts mask complex issues? And also, how is the history of the Lithuanian Jews presented to the reader? In a 'clever' or in a 'clear' way? By presenting essentially well-known facts through the prism of new insights, or by repeating well-known facts, just accumulated in one synthetic publication? And to what degree can the history of the Lithuanian Jews be retold by non-Jewish authors, whose knowledge of the tradition of Judaism is not very deep?

First of all, we should look at the aims and objectives set by the authors of the book. As is stated in the Introduction, 'one of the key questions of the study is to find out how "Lithuanian" the identity of the Jews who lived in Lithuania in different historical periods was. To put it simply, the authors of the book wanted to discuss whether Jews historically accepted Lithuania as only a temporary or interim place to live, while issues of political identity were of no interest to them, or whether the relationship with the political entity, that is, Lithuania, was important to them and they felt like members of larger political units' (p. 11). However, at the end of the study, they write that the study sought to 'reveal the relations between *Lithuanian Jews* or *Jews in Lithuania* and the predominating (Christian) group or the change in the collective identity of the Jews as an ethnic-confessional group' (p. 523), while overleaf we read that 'the study was an attempt by an international team of authors to combine different traditions of views on the history of Jews in East-Central Europe that until now have had little in common. The authors seek to restore a thorough view of the history of the Jews in Lithuania.' Therefore, the aim of the study *Lithuanian Jews* is somewhat lost in the mist, while the aspiration to find out how much the Jews from Lithuania identify with Lithuania 'from a political and civic point of view' (p. 11) is a source of confusion, as it means ignoring those Litvaks who were related to Lithuania merely as their place of origin, but whose cultural heritage had an impact on the process of European spiri-

<sup>3</sup> Lately, the writing of historical studies has increasingly turned into an institutional group activity, rather than an individual creative process. The times have changed since Simon Dubnov wrote his ten-volume *World History of the Jewish People*, although there are other examples, too. The English historian Peter Ackroyd is finishing a monumental six-volume *History of England*.

tual culture (such as the *École de Paris*, C. Soutine, N. Arbit Blatas, M. Katz, J. Lipchitz, etc). On the other hand, Judaism is an essential foundation of Jewish life: traditionally, a Jew is only a Jew when he observes God's principles of everyday behaviour during Kashrut, celebrates Shabbat, prays, studies the Torah, etc. Despite some changes caused by modern transformations, before the radical breakthroughs of the 20th century, the life of the Jewish community in Lithuania was regulated by religious provisions. This perception is not expressed in all the contributions to the study. Since it was compiled by a team of authors, we can observe a certain qualitative inequality, caused by the greater or lesser experience of the authors in studies of the history of the Lithuanian Jews, the knowledge of the Jewish tradition, the consistency of the narrative, and the subtleties of the academic language.

It is a pleasure to read the contributions by Saul Schampfer, Mordechai Zalkin and Vladimir Levin, which combine a deep knowledge of the problem, rationality of presentation, and a persuasive narrative style (I am thinking here of the example of the second rabbi). The insights of Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė into the situation of the Jewish community in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania stand out by their consistency, and also because her principal arguments were presented in former studies.<sup>4</sup> The contributions by S. Schampfer, M. Zalkin, D.E. Fishmann and D. Staliūnas present a consistent and high-quality analysis of the development of Jewish history until 1918 (when Jewish Lita was divided among three states, Soviet Russia, Poland and Lithuania), covering relations with the government, the Catholic Church and the predominating ethnic-confessional group, the social, economic and demographic situation, and educational and other aspects.

The parts about the Lithuanian Jews after 1918 fall into three structural parts: 1) the interwar period; 2) the period from 1940 to the restoration of Lithuania's independence; and 3) changes in the Jewish community in Lithuania after 1990. The analysis of the interwar period is composed of individual parts and episodes on different subjects: education (S. Kaubrys), anti-semitism (V. Sirutavičius), the economic activity of Jews (G. Vaskela), national autonomy (M. Zalkin), and some aspects about Jews and Lithuanians getting to know each other and coexisting (J. Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė); however, they do not present the whole picture. The history of the especially important Zionist movement in Lithuania is only covered in a few sentences, in the context of general political Jewish movements (pp. 323–326). Therefore, it is not surprising that David Wolffsohn, the leader of the World Zionist Organisation, and a follower of Theodor Herzl, who was born in a religious Talmudist family in Darbėnai, is 'lost' in the history of the Jews in Lithuania. A short encyclopaedic piece by M. Zalkin (pp. 417–424) covers the cultural processes that took place in the interwar Jewish

<sup>4</sup> ŠIAUČIŪNAITĖ-VERBICKIENĖ, J. *Žydai Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenėje: sambūvio aspektai* [Jews in the Society of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Aspects of Co-existence]. Vilnius, 2009.

community in Vilnius; however, no information is presented about the religious life, political orientation, or socio-economic life of the Jews in 'the Jerusalem of the North'.<sup>5</sup>

The piece by Ruth Kibelka-Leiserowitz about Jews in the Klaipėda Region in the interwar period (pp. 425–432) is a concentrated version of an article previously published in Germany.<sup>6</sup> Although it is only meant to cover the interwar period, the above-mentioned David Wolffsohn should at least have been mentioned in the context of Klaipėda, as he lived in Klaipėda and studied under Rabbi Isaac Rūlf. Incidentally, no information is presented about Rūlf, who is an important figure: his activity in collecting money for the Jews of Lita, his sending information about the pogroms in Russia to Western Europe, and his writings describing the life of Jews in Russian-ruled Lithuania are not mentioned either. The pro-Lithuanian activity of the outstanding Lithuanian businessman Nathal Nafthal is neglected, as are the contributions of the journalist Rudolf Valsonok and the lawyer Jacob Robinson to the Klaipėda case.<sup>7</sup> Actually, we could name more things that were omitted than those that were mentioned.

Writing about the plight of the Jews under the Soviet occupation and during the Holocaust in Lithuania (pp. 435–481), Arūnas Bubnys uses abundant materials from long-term research; however, the text is not so much about the Jews of Lithuania during the Second World War, but more about the Holocaust in Lithuania. The facts and figures about the destruction of Lithuanian Jewish communities are presented; however, voices from the ghetto, from the persecuted, the hunted, which could have been found in the memoirs and writings of A. Torry, E. Holcmanienė, S. Ginaitė-Rubinsonienė and A. Faitelson, are missing. How were the Jews affected by the total destruction of the religious tradition and the rites that make a Jew a Jew? There is no mention of famous Lithuanian Jewish activists (R. Valsonok, N. Nafthal, the Štromas family, I. Grinberg, L. Garfunkelis, and others) who were herded into the Kaunas ghetto. The activities of Jews who were related to communist partisans (*Fareynigte Partizaner Organizatsie* [FPO], AKO, C. Yellin, A. Kovner) (pp. 470–480) are described in greater detail; however, the active Zionist organisation *Irgun Britit Cion* is only mentioned in one sentence, and the *Bricha* (Hebrew for 'escape') movement of Vilnius Jews does not receive a single word. The arguments about Jews and Lithuanians in the years of the war and about the Righteous Among the Nations are not developed, while vague sentences ('Jews were rescued by people from different social strata and professions. However, the greatest number of rescuers appeared among ordinary country

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz in the book *From That Place and Time. A Memoir, 1938-1947* (New York, London, 1989) presents an intriguing view of the vital life of Vilnius Jews in the interwar period.

<sup>6</sup> LEISEROWITZ, R. Memelgebiet. In *Das „Großdeutsche Reich“ und die Juden. Nationalsozialistische Verfolgung in den „angegliederten“ Gebieten* (Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Bd. 17). Hrsg. von W. GRUNER, J. OSTERLOH. Frankfurt a. M., 2010, S. 175–198.

<sup>7</sup> The study *Comment on the Klaipėda Convention* by Jacob Robinson, an outstanding expert on international law, published in the 1930s, has not lost its relevance.

people, intellectuals, and the clergy of different confessions. Frequently, neighbours, friends or schoolmates were saved' (pp. 470-471)) only make things confusing. Rescuers of Jews such as Bronius Paukštys and Ona Šimaitė should have been mentioned: then it would have become clear that the role of the Catholic Church as an institution, and of individual members, in rescuing Jews in Lithuania was an exclusive one. No effort was made to consider the issue of the views of surviving Jews about Lithuanians, or the effect of these views on further relations. The objective set by the compilers of the study, to investigate 'the changes in the collective identity of an ethnic-confessional group' (p. 523), in the context of the Holocaust could have been achieved more successfully.

The most controversial part of the study *Lithuanian Jews* is devoted to the situation of the Jews in Lithuania from the end of the Second World War to the last decade of the 20th century. A number of omissions were apparently caused by the shortage of factual data. Samuel Barnai discusses the situation of the Jews in Soviet Lithuania; however, quite a few of his arguments can be seen as stereotypical repetition. Anti-semitism in Soviet Lithuania is emphasised (pp. 487-490); however, the statements are based on unidentified documents. Although the author writes about Jews in Soviet institutions, he does not mention the fact that, of the Jews who stayed in Lithuania after the war, some communist elements who integrated into various institutional structures in Soviet Lithuania gained considerable influence (such as C. Aizenas, M. Bordonaitė, C. Alperavičius, E. Bilevičius, S. Gutmanas, M. Joffé, A. Slavinas, D. Todesas and G. Zimanas). The fact is not mentioned that, in Soviet Lithuania, a systematic persecution of Jewish culture and memory, as well as the destruction of Jewish literature in Hebrew and hiding it in special closed archives, took place. Jewish printing houses and their publishing activities in Lithuania were stopped. The Hebrew language completely disappeared, while the percentage of Jews speaking Yiddish decreased. Despite the unfavourable circumstances, the national consciousness of Lithuanian Jews was greater than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, due to surviving religious practices (Shabbat, Kashrut, etc). As is noted by Barnau, Soviet Jews arriving in Vilnius learnt how to be Jews again (pp. 503-505, 507).

V. Sirutavičius writes about developments in newly independent Lithuania, by focusing on relations between the new government and the community, which, as is rightly noted, was not homogeneous (p. 509). He concentrates more on the policy of Lithuanian political structures (*Sąjūdis*, the Reconstituent Seimas) with respect to Jews than on changes and tensions within the Jewish community. It is strange to see the story ending in 1991. The author notes that some Jews in Lithuania greeted the restoration of independence with distrust (Jewish people frequently felt that revolutionary changes were not always for the better), and some openly supported pro-Moscow forces. Religious Jews felt that it was possible to try and restore the reli-

gious tradition; others grabbed the opportunity to emigrate to Israel or economically strong Western countries. Most frequently, the author refers to E. Zingeris' group, which related its future to a restored Lithuania.

Sirutavičius does not mention that in 1990, a paper, *Lietuvos Jeruzalė* (Jerusalem of Lithuania), started being published in three languages (Yiddish, Lithuanian and Russian), and the book by Solomonas Atamukas *Žydai Lietuvoje* (Jews in Lithuania) was published in Yiddish in the same year. It was the first book to be published in Yiddish after an almost 50-year break. Jews started writing about Jews in Lithuania without ideological clichés.

As the story ends in 1991, the apology by President Algirdas Brazauskas in Israel's Knesset in 1995, which both provoked debate in Lithuania and affected the sentiments of the Jewish community, is not mentioned. An international conference devoted to the 200th anniversary of the death of the Gaon of Vilnius, which also had a significant resonance, as well as the process of restitution that started in 1992, whereby 18 objects of real estate (mainly synagogues) were returned to the Jewish community, are not mentioned, either.<sup>8</sup> The rebirth of Jewish religious life in Lithuania, also related to confrontations (such as between Litvaks and the Chabad Lubavitcher movement), is not touched upon. However, unlike other authors, Sirutavičius must have found it difficult to write that part, as the historical story of the Jews in Lithuania after 1990 is intertwined with political processes.

The illustrations in the book also deserve some criticism. Photographs from Jewish publications without clear content of information predominate (pp. 346, 400, 475, 499, 502, 511), and the dates of the photographs are not always given, which is misleading. It is somehow difficult to believe that in Soviet times Jews during *purim shpiels* publicly dared to show, on a stage, people dressed up as Stalin, Brezhnev or Arafat (p. 501). That must have taken place around 1988-1990.

Evidently, answering some questions about the Jews in Lithuania will still take some time. Although the chain linking the chapters by the authors of the study regularly breaks, this book is the first of its kind to be published in Lithuanian, and the inclusion of work by foreign authors provides it with a new quality. The circumstances will mean that the study *Lithuanian Jews* will not become just another contribution to the lists of historiography.

<sup>8</sup> See: GELEŽEVIČIUS, R. *Holokausto teisingumas ir restitucija Lietuvoje atkūrus nepriklausomybę (1990–2003)* [The Holocaust Justice and Restitution in Lithuania after the Restoration of Independence (1990–2003)]. Vilnius, 2003.