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REPORT FROM LITHUANIA

by *Basia Nikiforova*

write of a very small and shrinking Jewish community. Today there are only 5,500 Lithuanian Jews who constitute less than 0.2% of the Lithuanian population.



The history of Jews in Lithuania is intimately connected to the special geo-political and national-religious environment in Lithuania, which changed substantially over the past 50 years. During the 20th century, Lithuania lost its status as an independent state by its inclusion as a national-geographical unit of the Soviet Union. It regained its independence less than a decade ago. Today we have a generation, which in its childhood felt itself as the national-religious majority (Lithuanians-Catholics), in its maturity lived in a state where it felt itself as the national-religious minority, and in its old age it has returned to its initial position as the majority.

As a result of this history, Lithuanians – along with Latvians and Estonians – are people whose self-perception and self-consciousness encompass the mentality of both a majority and minority culture. These nations stood the test of colonial cultural policies: the facade of privileges in the development of the national culture combined with Russification.

For this reason these nations are very sensitive to the problem of tolerance/intolerance.

The Baltic States during the Soviet period had their own specific experience with Soviet colonialism. This included the deportation of part the native population of (the so-called “bourgeois” part) to Siberia and North Russia, and of much resettlement of ethnic Russians on Lithuanian territory. The result is that Latvians and Estonians scarcely constitute a majority in their own states (only around 62% are ethnic Estonians, 52% are Latvians). By contrast, Lithuania has been for many centuries the epicenter and the point of intersection for different national and religious cultures. But at the moment of statehood’s restoration, Lithuania was very close to being an unicultural state. In comparison with Latvia and Estonia, 81.4% of Lithuania’s population are ethnic Lithuanians, and 98% of believers are Catholics. The national minorities in Lithuania make up only 18.6%: they include 8.3% Russians, 6.9% Poles, 1.5% Byelorussians, 1.0% Ukrainians, and 0.2% Jews.

The situation in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania has influenced the formation of each country’s legislative principles and practices concerning tolerance issues. Lithuania, alone among the Baltic States, from the first months of independence decided in favor of the so-called “zero variant” for citizenship acquisition. “Zero variant,” means that everybody who lived in the territory of Lithuania until 1989 (the restoration of Lithuanian independence) has the right to be a Lithuanian citizen. During the first two years after independence, everybody had time to choose Lithuanian citizenship or other variants. After that, acquisition of citizenship became a process with some conditions (time of stay in Lithuania, the knowledge of the state language, etc.). This decision was the result of the democratization process, tolerance, and political pragmatism, which created the juridical basis for a decline of potential tensions between the national majority and minorities. The legislative separation of church and state (which in practice is not complete) became the juridical basis of equal rights under the law for registration and functioning for all faiths in

Lithuania. Lithuania's Jewish community has had a long and distinguished history. In the mid-nineteenth century, the territory which may be termed "historic Lithuania" included a large part of Poland, Belarus, Russia and encompassed about 2.5 million Jews, who comprised about 15% of the total population. As a result of World War One, Lithuania became more homogeneous and Jews comprised about 9% of its population.

Jews were already settled in Lithuania by the 1500s and were accorded a considerable degree of tolerance and goodwill. Their relatively favorable situation over the next three centuries drew additional Jewish migrants from other parts of Europe. At the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Great Duchy of Lithuania was relatively tolerant and afforded possibilities for development of economical and spiritual Jewish life. As a result, the influx of a heterogeneous Jewish population contributed to the evolution of a distinctly Lithuanian Jew. The *Litwak* was differentiated from the Polish Jew and developed a different community, even though Polish and Lithuanian Jewry were subsumed under the same political entity, the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, during two centuries. In fact, by the seventeenth century, a Jewish Council of Lithuania was able to promulgate a series of laws that established a large degree of autonomy for the Jewish community. A network of schools and social institutions was in place by the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The fortunes of the Jewish community were largely determined by the ruling powers and by events in the national and religious majority. M. J. Rosman's book *The Lords' Jews* is a good source for Jewish history in this period and its legal framework.

From the seventeenth century on, Lithuanian Jewry attained worldwide prominence. Rabbinical leadership, including most prominently Elijah ben Judah Solomon Zalman – the Vilna *Gaon* – established a series of distinguished *yeshivot* and the rise of Lithuania's reputation as a center of Jewish scholarship. An international conference was held in Vilnius last year to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the *Gaon's* death.

During the nineteenth century in Lithuania there existed number of competing movements: the *Mitnagdim*, *Hasidim*, *Musar*, and *Zionism*. These competing movements created many conflicts and tensions but at the same time produced many famous leaders, including women who played a important role in Jewish political, social and cultural life. Among them were Helena Chackle, Alta Sudarskij, Anna Rozental, Roza Shabat-Gavrajaska, Sofia Gurevich, Elena Chackis and many others. They were teachers, political activists, social workers and writers. Their presence was felt in the every sphere of Jewish life, not only in Vilnius and Kaunas, but in every little *shtetl*.

The case of Helena Chackel is particularly interesting for us. She was born in Kaunas in the end of the nineteenth century. She was very well educated: a graduate of the Kaunas gymnasium, and the Saint-Petersburg Bestuzev Women's Courses. She was leader of the Jewish cultural, educational and social organizations in Kaunas, head of WIZO, the editor of the Jewish children's magazine, a writer and literature teacher in the Shalom Aleichem School.

Alta Sudarskij was born in Dwinsk (Belarus). Her family moved to Lithuania, where she very soon assumed an important place in the Jewish women's movement, and in the development of Yiddish language and literature. Her parents' home was a center of the Jewish public and cultural life. Some years before World War II, she and her husband Mendl Sudarskij emigrated to the USA, where they composed the book *Lita* about Jews in Lithuania. After the death of her husband, she published a second volume alone.

During the 1920s, the Jews were the largest minority group resident in the country, constituting 7.6% of the total population. Good times for Lithuanian Jewry ended on June 22, 1941. During the first two months of the Nazi occupation, most of Lithuania's provincial Jews were murdered. The first victims of Nazi and Lithuanian collaboration were the *shtetl* Jews. The next victims were Jews killed in ghettos when the ghettos were liquidated. Of the 250,000 Jews in Lithuania on the eve of World War II, only about 25,000 were still alive at war's end. The Jews of Lithuania and their physical institutions were destroyed almost completely, sometime with the help of Lithuanian collaborators.

The real post-war rebuilding of the Jewish community in Lithuania began only after its independence in 1990. At that time, there were about 12,400 Jews in Lithuania. The post-war Jewish exodus had started in the 1950s. During this decade, 24,672 Jews emigrated to Israel via Poland. In the 1970s, more than 15% of the Jewish population immigrated to Israel. In 1994, estimated the number of Jews living in the country to be only 6,500. The largest concentration – some 4,000 people – lived in Vilnius. Jews were attracted to Vilnius both by its historical reputation as a center of Jewish life and by its important role as the center of Lithuania's economic, educational, cultural, and political activities. Today only 5,500 Jews remain in the country.

Who is a Jew? Self-definition of nationality, official designation of nationality, or religious adherence can determine Jewish identity. 62% of those who identified as Jews were born in Lithuania. Females far outnumber males (only 83 males for every 100 females) compared to 90 males for every 100 females in the Lithuanian population as a whole. 43% of all Jewish women in Lithuania have a higher education. In the age group 25-44 55.6% have a higher education. This is a higher level of education in this gender and age group than in Lithuania as a whole.

The situation of Jewish woman is the following: 43% of Jewish women are retired; 36% are employed; 8% are unemployed; 3% are students; and 10% are in unspecified situations. Employed woman can be broken down by sector. The largest group (27.5%) are working as engineers or technicians. The second largest group (21%) is employed in education. Other intellectual professions employs 17.6% of Jewish women; 8.2% work in medicine; 9.7% as office workers; 7.3% as manual workers; 3% as service workers. The marital status of Jewish women in Lithuania is reported as follows: married – 60.9% are married; 8.1% are divorced; 17% are widowed; 14.0% are single.

Most Jewish woman (69.9%) have one or two children (33.6% and 36.3%) and are active in the recreation of Jewish life and the restoration of the Jewish tradition in Lithuania. They work in Jewish schools, kindergartens, mass media, and social organizations whose most important function is to help single old and ill Jews. WIZO head, Mrs. Rachel Kostenian, described the typical Jewish woman she encounters as retired, poor, active in the Vilnius Jewish Society's social and cultural life, originally from outside of Lithuania, interested in studying Jewish history, culture and traditions, often single and alone; her children having already emigrated to Israel.

There are Jewish women who are currently prominent in Lithuanian cultural, scientific and social life. Some are famous writers like Violetta Palchinskaite. Several generations of Lithuanian children have grown up hearing her tales and attending her plays for the Children's Theater. One of the leading Lithuanian graphics artists is A. Skliutauskaite and in painting, I. Bindler. Professor Irena Veisaite is a famous theater

critic and head of the Council of the Open Society Fund of Lithuania (the local Soros Foundation).

Mrs. Marina Zibuc is the head of publishing department of this Fund.

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews is now commonplace in Lithuania. This is the result of 50 years of Soviet strategy of secularization and internationalization and an indication of the integration of Jews into Lithuanian society. At the same time, it is evidence of the potential disappearance of Jews who choose to remain in Lithuania. Today the small Lithuanian Jewish community has a 41% rate of intermarriage and 56% of their children are born into families of mixed-origin. Only 42% of them identify themselves as Jewish.

The subject of my own current research is the role of Jewish women in the promotion of children's Jewish identity in the mixed family. To what extent Jews might disappear in Lithuania and how quickly that could occur depends on the current and future Jewish identity of children from mixed marriages. Our task is to identify which factors support or hinder a Jewish woman in her mission of transmitting Judaism in the domestic environment, to ascertain how influential these factors are and to determine how influential religious affiliation or the absence of non-Jewish parents are on the formation of children's Jewish identity.

Our first hypothesis assumes the existence of two groups of factors:

The factors supportive of a Jewish woman's mission include a communal spiritual atmosphere returning to national and religious identity; a governmental policy of tolerance sympathetic to the preservation of Jewish heritage; and growing Jewish self-consciousness in the post-Soviet era. These factors nurture the creation of a Jewish society and many Jewish organizations including a Jewish national school, close contacts with Israel and international Jewish organizations, an educational program for Jewish children from Lithuania in Israel, and a Catholic-Jewish dialogue supported by the Vatican and international Jewish organizations.

The negative factors hindering a Jewish woman's mission include several factors. First is the strong influence of secularization. For example, Jewish social and cultural life is very active in Lithuania. At the same time a Jewish women living in an intermarriage is usually far away from the synagogue. A second factor is a relic of the Soviet idea that the family is a "microenvironment for ethnic integration and natural assimilation." Other important factors are growing domestic nationalism and a concomitant low level of tolerance to "otherness" in interpersonal relationships; the absence of a Reform branch of Judaism, and the traditional anti-Judaism of Lithuanian and Polish Catholics.

Our second hypothesis will assume that the incidence of mixed marriages will grow in Lithuania. The reasons for this include the fact that the parents of the young generation are spiritual products of compulsory assimilation during the last 50 years and, as a result, have lost most of their Jewish heritage and religion. The Jewish community is very small and the possibility of finding a marriage partner within this small pool very limited. After the restoration of the Lithuanian State, contacts with Jews from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine have become more difficult. The new governmental requirements of visas and higher travel expenses limit the possibilities of choice. Jews who decided stay in Lithuania mostly aspire to integration and to adapt to Lithuanian culture and society.

The fact that our subject of research is the role of the Jewish woman in the creation of Jewish identity of the children doesn't mean that we are ignoring the Jewish man's part in this process. It only means that our subject is woman. We are very carefully analyzing the participation of both Jewish men and women in the creation of children's Jewish identity.

We propose that the role of the Jewish woman in the creation of her children's Jewish identity depends on many factors: her level of Jewish identity or her assimilation and secularization; her relations and contacts with her family, the Jewish environment, the reasons for which she decided to marry a non-Jew; and the national and religious status of the non-Jewish man she married. Jewish women must also depend on the general spiritual atmosphere of society, the level of tolerance, objective conditions for Jewish education; and their plans to remain in the country or to leave Lithuania in the future. The Lithuanian Catholic influence over the mixed family is more powerful than the Russian influence, which often has lost its own historical and cultural roots after the break-up of the Soviet Union and is no longer associated with the Orthodox church.

We are undertaking an ethnographic study, which will include interviews with Jewish mothers, interviews with children from mixed families where the mother or father is non-Jewish; and a content analysis of student essays from Jewish schools titled "How I understand my Jewish identity and who/what has an influence on this perception."

It is important to find out the real indicators of Jewish identity in a country where more than half of the Jewish population is not affiliated with a synagogue but simply feels "Jewish." In the case of the Lithuanian Jewish mixed family, our task is to find this list of indicators, which explore the personal Jewish expression of people who often unite their personal identity with ethnic, national and traditional issues rather than with religious issues.