

LITHUANIAN TOLERANCE IN 3 ACTS By Si Frumkin

The headline on the Internet article read, “In Baltics, teaching about Shoah sometimes touches raw nerves”. It was a story of a high school in Lithuania where the students had created a Tolerance Center – student drawings of Jews deported, separated from their families, looking out through barbed wire.

There were 250,000 Jews in Lithuania before the war. 230,000 of them died. I am one of the survivors.

Lithuania – and Latvia and Estonia, the other two Baltic countries - regained their independence from the Soviet Union in 1990 and joined the European Union and NATO 14 years later. One of the preconditions for joining the club was that the history of the Holocaust be taught by the new members but, according to the article, compliance is spotty.

Just 46 high schools in the entire country have Tolerance Centers like the one described in the article. Their activities are voluntary, held after school. The history book for 16- and 17-year olds devotes only 6 pages to “Destruction of the Lithuanian Jewish Community”. Negotiations on returning Jewish property have stalled for years and local culpability or the slaughter is largely rejected – the Germans are held accountable for the war crimes. No Baltic nation has ever imprisoned a local Nazi war criminal. Anti-Jewish outbursts are common in the media and the Internet.

I remember it differently. I was just ten years old in 1941 when it took the Germans just three days to reach our city. There was no fighting. The Soviet army, under equipped and demoralized, had fled in disarray. Our city Kaunas, (also known as Kovno, in Yiddish) was ruled by bands of Lithuanian nationalists who sniped at the retreating soldiers and went from house to house looking for Jews. They came to our house and herded us into the street where a few dozen Jews were already standing, surrounded by a Lithuanian mob. Then a miracle happened. A voice from the crowd called out to my dad.

“Mr. Frumkin, Mr. Frumkin,” a man yelled. “I am Mike. I am a mechanic. I worked at your business, remember? How are you, Mr. Frumkin?”

And to the man with a rifle guarding us, “Hey, I know these people. They are good people. Let them go, OK, buddy?” The guard looked at us and waved, “You three, go back to the house, get out of here.”

We survived that day. The others – and several thousand more - were taken to a central square where they were clubbed to death – bullets were scarce. Hundreds of curious civilians, and later German soldiers as well, stood around and watched, many took pictures. I retrieved some of them after the war.

As I read the article I thought about two encounters I had in California decades later.

The first one was a meeting in Los Angeles, just a few months after Lithuania got its independence, with the newly appointed Lithuanian Consul-General. The Simon Wiesenthal Center was trying to pressure Lithuania into prosecuting a Lithuanian war criminal who was being deported from the U.S. and I was among the 4 people who came to talk with the Lithuanian consul. He was polite and articulate but didn’t think much of our arguments. In a nutshell, he refused to admit that Lithuanians had anything to do with killing Jews.

“Yes,” he said, “there were executions and Jews were shot, but you see, this was done by Germans. They put on Lithuanian uniforms but they were all Germans, only Germans. You were fooled. Obviously the man you are talking about was railroaded... By whom? Well, you know that better than I do. No, no, he isn’t guilty of anything.”

We left, frustrated and angry. In any case, the deported murderer died of old age and some sickness soon after. There never was a trial.

The other encounter was very different. I was invited to speak about the Holocaust at a Catholic school for girls in an exclusive Los Angeles suburb.

I spoke of my experiences, of the relevance of the Holocaust to post-war generations, of good and evil that afflict humanity. The audience was attentive, respectful, polite.

As I was leaving, a girl came up to me. She was a typical sunny-California teenage beauty – tall, blond, tanned, sky blue eyes and sparkly teeth.

“I am Lithuanian,” she said. “I never heard anything about Lithuanians killing Jews like you told us about. My grandfather lived in Kaunas and he told us about the Germans coming, but he never said anything about the Jews.”

The she smiled, shyly. “I go to a Lithuanian school on Sundays. I am sure that the other kids would also like to hear your story. Could you come and speak to our school?”

“Of course,” I said. “I would love to. But I don’t think that I’ll be invited.”

She looked puzzled. “Why do you say that? Why not? Isn’t this something that we should know? I will speak to our principal tomorrow and I know that he’ll want you to come.”

I gave her my number and address and told her that I would be waiting for a call from the principal.

I am still waiting.