

How memory prevails

By Leonidas Donskis

The Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has developed the theory of the adiaphorization of consciousness. He says that during times of upheaval and at critical historical junctures or intense social change, people lose some of their sensitivity and refuse to apply an ethical perspective to other people. They simply eliminate an ethical relationship with others. These others don't necessarily become enemies or demons; they are more like statistics, circumstances, obstacles, factors, unpleasant details and obstructing circumstances. But at the same time they are no longer people with whom we would like to meet in a "face to face" situation, whose gaze we might follow, at whom we might smile or to whom we might even return in the name of recognition of the existence of the Other.

People who have lost their sensitivity temporarily, or for a long time are no demons. They simply remove from their sensitivity zone certain people or entire groups. As the Greek stoics of antiquity, and later religious reformers and thinkers in the Renaissance, believed, there are things which are in reality inessential and unimportant, matters over which there is no point to argue or cross swords. This kind of unimportant thing is called an adiaphoron, and the plural is adiaphora.

This theory sheds much light on the Holocaust and its traumatized, sometimes even twisted memory, which remains a sinister aspect of Eastern and Central European politics. The Jews appear there as unimportant things, inconvenient details, circumstances and academic footnotes pushed by historians. They are hindrances. Because of them, "we" are unable to create our gallery of heroes and our heroic narrative as we would like. All that remains is for us to ask ourselves whether all this supposed patriotic pragmatism is sensible. It is not serving the past and certainly not honoring the memory of the dead, but simply allowing for political mudslinging and sending the "right" message to voters. If so, that means we are choosing an immoral version of patriotism which no longer includes ethics, truth or conscience.

At this point, the novel 'Darkness and Partners,' written by Sigita Parulskis, a talented and internationally renowned Lithuanian writer, comes as a powerful eye-opener. It shows how people can lose their sensitivity and memory, how they can kill their fellow human beings and compatriots with a strong belief in the right course they are allegedly pursuing. The novel exposes a profoundly amoral logic behind this loss of sensitivity. Adiaphorization is here; as if to say that the Jews are not ours. They do not belong to Lithuania. They are merely unimportant things, inconvenient details, circumstances and academic footnotes pushed by historians. They are hindrances. Because of them, we are unable to create our gallery of heroes and our heroic narrative as we would like. We are choosing an immoral version of patriotism which no longer includes ethics, truth or conscience.

Reminiscent of the aesthetics of shocking beauty deeply permeated with ugliness, inherent in such masterpieces of cinematography as Liliana Cavani's masterpiece 'The Night Porter' and Lina Wertmuller's 'Seven Beauties' ('Pasqualino Settebellezze'), Sigita Parulskis' 'Darkness and Partners,' released in 2013 is a tour de force, a blow dealt to a readership by the way a writer handles tragic history of his nation, and a sigh of relief.

The problem for Lithuanian Jews is that quite a large sector of Lithuanian society – including not a few representatives of the intelligentsia – is still inclined to consider the Jews as collectively responsible for the mass killings and deportations of civilians, as well as for other atrocities committed during the Soviet occupation on the eve of the Second World War. This tendency represents a disgraceful adoption of the Nazi rhetoric that equated "Communism" with "the Jews." In an effort to modify the charges that Lithuanians participated in the mass killings of Jews in 1941 and after, some Lithuanians have spoken of "two genocides," or – as some Jewish writers have called it – a "symmetry" in the suffering among both peoples.

This notorious theory of a "historic guilt" of Lithuanian Jews, which up to now has been deeply embedded in Lithuanian political discourse and popular consciousness, claims that the local Jewry was disloyal and unpatriotic towards Lithuania on the eve of the Second World War, and ultimately was instrumental for the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Hence, the derivative theory of "two genocides," which provides an assessment of the Holocaust and of local collaborators of the Nazis in terms of revenge for the Soviet genocide of Lithuanian nationals. It is little wonder that the theory of "two genocides" – which is just another term for the theory of "collective guilt of the Jews" – has been qualified by Tomas Venclova as "troglodytic," thus characterizing people who are still inclined to practice it as "moral troglodytes."

Needless to say, much remains to be desired, and even more so to be done, to come to terms with the most tragic pages of Lithuanian history. Yet there are some encouraging and inspiring signs, as a tiny and aging minority of Lithuanian Jews (around 5,000 people out of 240,000 prior to World War Two) is no longer an isolated voice crying in the wilderness. Young Lithuanian writers who showed great sensitivity to the Shoah over the past years – such as Daiva Cepauskaite with her play 'The Hole,' and Sigita Parulskis with his aforementioned novel 'Darkness and Partners' – are the best proof that the Holocaust is not sinking into oblivion in Lithuania; instead, it is powerfully reinterpreted by young writers whose experience would naturally lead them back to the 1980s, rather than the Second World War. Yet deeply ethical memory prevails over forgetting.

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"Sadly, in Lithuania we vote with our feet, not hands"

By Linas Jegelevicius

Septuagenarian Social Democrat dignitary of the Act of the Re-Establishment of Lithuania's statehood, and now an MEP, Justas Vincas Paleckis, who extends the family tradition of statesmanship (his father Justas was a prominent Communist in WWII and postwar eras) today is mostly preoccupied with the issue of the formidable emigration from Lithuania. This summer he has been touring the country, meeting the party's grassroots as well as ordinary people and introducing his new book: "I will (not) emigrate! Why did I choose so?" This agile politician stalwart kindly agreed to sit down and take The Baltic Times' questions.

Why does emigration matter so much?

Because its impact is huge and, perhaps, irreversible. We all here have shrunk to the status of a less-than-three-million nation... We do not only experience the brain drain that we've always accentuated, but also, when it comes to voting, we see that we've been doing so, illustratively speaking, not as much by our hands as by our legs - decamping for a better life. The statistics purport that, every day, Lithuania loses more than hundred people, who leave for the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain and Germany. Usually, and not temporarily, to earn some money there, but they move there with their entire families, villages and town districts.

Is unemployment to blame for this?

Not only this, in fact. Other things, like lack of respect for a person, many employers' efforts to squeeze out all the sap of their workers and the trade unions' impotence to curb this are among other things to consider. And there are a whole lot more things making our people pack up and leave the country, like the education system, mired in the experimental search for the best system, and even the former government's confrontation against our closest neighbors. All this incites our people to search for a better life in a safe country elsewhere. One that respects its citizens and takes care of them.

The book is a compilation of schoolchildren's compositions about emigration. What surprised you most in them?

The bluntness and sometimes really hard and unpleasant replies on why people want to leave, or have already left Lithuania. However, there were more young people who looked at the future optimistically and often questioned themselves, asking: If it's not I to stay and make a change here, so then who will? The texts, for the most part, are left unique and very little is edited. The winners of the composition competition went to Brussels last autumn, by the way.

The European Parliament is gearing up for a new election next spring. Is the mood already "hanging" on there?

Yes, it does, indeed! As the EP autumn parliamentary session is about to start in a few weeks, all the euro parliamentarians are excitedly looking forward to it, as well as to the time left until the election. It is really very important what political parties will foray into the



parliament in May next year.

How does it look from today's perspective; what parties have the best chance to clinch seats?

It's really very hard to tell now. I can just hope that there will be a larger presence of Social Democrats, also liberals and representatives of the Green party, both of which have proved to be our political allies.

Perhaps you've heard of a major novelty in the upcoming EP election, that the parties that will get the EP seats will be able to present their candidates for the post of president of the European Commission.

And the party that will rack up the majority of votes will be entitled to insist that its candidate is nominated as EC president. If the Socialist Party will garner the most votes, its candidate for the post will be the current EP President Martin Schulz.

Will you run for the MEP seat again?

No. I have decided not to run. After spending ten years in the parliament, I told myself it is enough, and let the youth try it out.

Have you decided what you will do after you leave Brussels?

(Grins.) In fact, I have some well-thought plans I am eager to take on. Perhaps you know that by profession I'm a journalist, so I want to wade into the realm again. Honestly, I cannot wait for the moment I can sit down at my computer, free of any commitments and busy schedules and pour my memories out onto the screen.

I am looking forward to picking up that book. I am sure you've got a lot to tell.

I really do. During the period of EU membership, Lithuania has been living through an entirely new period of development and history, which guarantees it yet an unprecedented security. However, not all the possibilities EU membership gives have been used until now. Especially when it comes to tackling the social disparity.

The line between political right and left in the West is very distinct, but it is obscure in Lithuania, you have to agree. Why is this so? Perhaps the right, to some extent, are those people who reckon the Lithuanian Social Democrats and the Conservatives are more alike than different?

I cannot agree with that. There are, sure, evident differences. Since the Social Democrat Party is really open to all views within the party,

there is a big variety of opinions in it, from very liberal to more modest and restrained ones... For the example, speaking of progressive taxes, which could be the differing line between the two ideologies, the Lithuanian Social Democrats have written it into its program, but it is very hard to pursue the implementation of the pledge under the current circumstances.

Why?

Well, the fledgling middle class would be harmed, journalists included, who, no doubt, would take their vengeance against the party. But this will have to be done. But not now, some time later.

Why then are the Lithuanian Social Democrats so conservative on a range of social issues, from abortion to gay rights?

Well, some of the party members indeed are, but they are a minority, compared to the Conservatives' opposition to the issues. I really see our Social Democrats being, on those issues, a whole lot more progressive. On the other hand, Lithuania has not yet been completely imbued with the ideas as in the Western countries. In that sense, sure, our Social Democrats are more conservative in comparison.

Statistically, Lithuania falls behind Western Europe in voter turnout at election. Is there any way to turn it around in Lithuania?

(Sighs.) It is really a big lag and a minus of the political life in Lithuania. I always keep repeating one thing: the less people vote, the worse people come to power. As a rule, when there is a small turnout, it is always possible to impact in certain ways the outcome of an election. This is a really good question as to what could incite a larger participation. But it is very hard to come up with a definite recipe. I believe it should be every party's and every political establishment's objective to spur the election turnout rate.

Do you see any candidate able to throw down the gauntlet against the incumbent president, Dalia Grybauskaitė?

It is hard to tell at this point. I just wish there were several candidates capable of that. But our president, I believe, is not vulnerability-proof. Sure, she [Grybauskaitė] has done quite a lot, but she has some weaknesses.

What are they?

Well, first of all, her obvious orientation to the political right.