



RECALLING A CENTURY-OLD "NIGHT MARCH", OR THE DANGERS OF AN UNTREATED "CHILDHOOD RADICALISM DISEASE"

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The year 1923 was marked by significant internal and external tensions in Europe. The effects of WWI were still felt, state borders were still being formed and arms were still clanging. Political passions were felt everywhere: both in the old imperial nations and in the new ones reborn from the fragments of separate empires. Social and national contradictions, even violent in some places, convulsed the fractured societies like electricity. Bolsheviks waved red flags, while fascists wearing black shirts were fighting with them. Both glorified the gun and force, as well as promised to defeat all their enemies in order to achieve their ultimate goal: power. Both were rapidly expanding their circle of supporters and imitators in various countries. Parliamentary democracy, which had been handicapped, was denounced by many radicals, both leftists and rightists. Then the illusion that only dictatorship and coercion could bring order and stability to life began to grow.

In 1923, Lithuanian political life was marked by great hopes and great disappointments. In mid-January, Klaipėda Region was successfully annexed, but then the regaining of the historic capital Vilnius failed. The International Conference of Ambassadors settled the territorial dispute in favour of Poland, not Lithuania. The setback further heated up the atmosphere in Lithuanian government circles. Seeing no other way, President Aleksandras Stulginskis dissolved the Seimas (parliament) on March 15. New elections were scheduled

for May. The period before it was characterised by fierce rivalries between the Christian Democratic Party, which was trying to stay in power, and its most serious rivals, the Socialist People's Democrats and the Peasant Union. The Christian Democrats made full use of their administrative leverage and their considerable influence over the state apparatus, law enforcement and the army. They furiously attacked their opponents by spreading slanderous fabrications in the press, in particular in their daily newspaper "Laisvė". One of the greatest evils of the Socialist People's Democrats and the Peasant Union, which was highlighted in the propaganda campaign, was the tolerant attitude towards Jews and other national minorities. The Christian Democrats, on the contrary, took up the anti-Semitism card not only in public rhetoric, but also in practice. With the unfavourable outcome of the "Vilnius case," Jews as allies became less necessary for the party that ruled Lithuania. Largely as a result of the fact that the post of Minister of Jewish Affairs, which had existed in the Government of the Republic of Lithuania from 1919 to 1923, was abolished, the rather broad national autonomy held by the Jewish community began to be severely curtailed. In order to make the process smoother and more natural-looking, efforts were made to deliberately stir up hostile sentiments. Some authors writing for "Laisvė", under the guise of nicknames, immediately began to complain that the Jews despised everything related to Lithuania: they did not learn or use the Lithuanian language, did not care about Lithuania at all because they were only making profit from it, and were devoting all efforts and capital only to Palestine. The lack of academic solidarity also led to indiscriminate criticism of Jewish students, especially medical students, who used the bodies of Christians for anatomy practice instead of the "insiders." Generally, all sorts of accusations were made, well-founded, grossly exaggerated and completely fictitious. It was not to be remembered that the permanent Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, adopted in 1922, the fundamental law of the state, officially guaranteed all citizens equality before and legally protected them from manifestations of national hatred. Unfortunately, the daily newspaper of the country's main ruling party, "Laisvė," spread anti-Semitic hatred unhindered and regularly. In order to illustrate such a situation, a relevant "small scandal" can be remembered from early 1923. It

appears in many historians' texts in one form or another, but it is still worth remembering it once again on the occasion of its centenary. This is what happened.

On the night of February 4, in the central part of the temporary capital, someone smeared black tar on the signs of dozens of shops, eateries and offices, written in a language other than Lithuanian. The victims were mainly Jews and Poles, who made up a large percentage of the city's population. According to the first census of the Republic of Lithuania in autumn 1923, Jews accounted for 7% of the total population of the country, while Poles made up 3%. In Kaunas, the percentage was even higher: 27 and almost 5 percent, respectively. It should also be mentioned that the representatives of these national minorities at that time were not very willing to accept the official figures, claiming that they were artificially decreased.

It was not easy to smear the signs and not everyone could do that. Constant martial law was enforced in the city, still fearing a Bolshevik or Polish uprising. This meant that it was strictly forbidden to walk around at night, not only in groups, but also for individuals, without the exclusive permission of the military commander. Police and soldiers patrolled the streets everywhere. The Jewish community was very outraged and immediately lodged a complaint with the police. The officials carried out a formal investigation but did not identify the perpetrators, even though it was almost certain that it was probably an "action" by activists linked to the Christian Democratic Party. This was indirectly confirmed by the daily newspaper "Laisvė," which not only failed to condemn the smear campaigners, but also immediately started to ridicule the claims of the victims. The Jewish press regarded the deplorable event as a hooligan attack, unambiguously showing the primitive and barbaric way of Lithuanian radicals. The comparison with a savage and uncivilised tribe became a prophecy. The violent perpetrators who terrorised the Jews are described in a very similar way in the well-known published diaries of Vilnius and Kaunas ghettos. Thus, the reproaches against the Lithuanian radicals, made in 1923, echoed with a terrible echo in 1941 and 1943, during the first weeks of the war

and the last days of the "Lithuanian Jerusalem." Then, once again, the brutal fanaticism that wanted to "purify Lithuania" as quickly as possible, to resolutely "solve the Jewish question," i.e. to remove and/or destroy what seemed alien, incomprehensible and did not fit into the framework of an egoistic and mythologised worldview became powerful. Thus, in February 1923, before the fifth anniversary of the founding of the democratic Republic of Lithuania, actions with clear hints of the threat of a pogrom were taken in order to visually make Kaunas Lithuanian in a few days. The extremists, driven by childish ambitions of arbitrariness, did not like the city's cultural mosaic, which had been assembled over several centuries. They wanted to start writing history on a completely new page, as white as the arm band of the Nazi collaborators who guarded the ghetto barriers. It is difficult for fanatical radicals to understand that violence does not win hearts and that violence only gives birth to a covert confrontation or even a desire for a rematch. The essence of a true and sustainable democracy is not the arrogant imposition of the will of the majority, but a consensus made on friendly terms. The naturally "grown" prestige of the national language will never be replaced by any administrative obligations. But who were these people who smeared Jewish, Polish and Russian signs on February 4, 1923? As has been mentioned, the police did not manage to find out at that time. Perhaps the whole story would have remained shrouded in fog had it not been for the fact that among the participants in the scandalous "night march" there were a few who, in their old age and, presumably, in order to boast a little about their "services to the homeland," revealed a secret kept for so long. That is when suspicions were confirmed that this was indeed the work of young people closely linked to the Christian Democrats, who dreamed of becoming the country's "future elite." This is what Povilas Gaučys, who certainly had a distinguished career as a diplomat in the 1930s, wrote about his "student-time adventures" in his memoirs in exile ("Between Two Worlds. From my Memoirs 1915-1938," Vilnius: "Mintis," 1992, page 73): "The initiators secretly agreed with Kaunas city and county governor, as well as the police chief, not to prevent students and officers from smearing tar on the signs at night. Lieutenant Aloyzas Valušis bought two barrels of post-oil at his own expense, which future chemist P.

Jucaitis, according to a formula he had invented, mixed with a certain amount of tar and made the mixture unwashable. A large number of young people took part in the operation, because it was necessary to finish the job as quickly as possible. The young people were divided into groups of five, and each group was accompanied by a lieutenant (so that some policeman would not interfere). This way, the multilingual shop signs were painted in a few hours. One misunderstanding occurred during the process. While Kamantauskas and his future wife were painting the signboard of Perkovskis café, Kaunas military commander V. Braziulevičius, who had not been warned about the activity, was present there. When he came out and saw the smearers [Major Braziulevičius - M.K.], he arrested them and took them to the commandant's office. Of course, they were released the same day. In the morning, surprised passers-by saw the signs smeared over. The owners of the shops made a big fuss, complaining to the authorities about the barbaric work of the "hooligans." The government ordered to find the culprits and punish them if found. Searches were carried out. They also came into my room, where a container with a paintbrush was hidden just under my things, because I had not been able to hide it better. The room smelled of tar, but the policeman looked around, found nothing and left."

What else can be added. This sounds like a confession, but without repentance. The general medical conclusion of the "collective patient" is the following: the course of the "disease of childhood radicalism" depends very much on the circumstances (form). If local authoritarianism prevails, the "disease" usually manifests itself only in the form of sign-painting and blasphemy, but if totalitarianism takes hold (caused by the bacilli of a foreign "superior race"), it can even end in shootings and arson. It is a pity that history only teaches us how to diagnose, but it does not cure diseases at all...



German postcards from WWI, showing the main street of Kaunas, which was named 'Kaiser Wilhelm Street' by the occupiers. In 1923, Laisvės Avenue looked very much the same, except that all public institutions and a large number of shops and cafés had signboards in Lithuanian.