

Intervention by H.E. Justas Vincas Paleckis,
Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania
at the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism
Session 3: the Role of Education

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Mr. Chairman, honourable participants of the Conference,

The Second OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism as well as the First Conference last year in Vienna provide us with a unique opportunity to discuss different aspects of the phenomena of Anti-Semitism, which affects our countries in multiple forms and manifestations, and to share the best practices and experience in countering it.

The litmus test of the maturity of every nation is the ability to confront the negative sides of its history. For Lithuania, as for some other states of Central Europe especially important is the attitude towards the dark events during the Second World War, towards Holocaust education. The Government of Lithuania rejects a history conscience, which is based on nationalistic myths, stereotypes and prejudices, which are not able to evaluate critically the past, which considers the own nation as an internal victim of the history.

There is no question that education is the most efficient instrument in our political toolbox for overcoming prejudices and ignorance that are the main sources of intolerance. State system of formal education is to be equipped with adequate teaching materials and be geared by well-trained and dedicated teachers. It is necessary, however, that efforts of educational community are

sustained by much broader awareness raising activities addressed to the whole society.

During the past decade Lithuania's educational system made a great progress in introducing issues of the 600 years of Jewish history in Lithuania and the history of Holocaust in the secondary schools curricula as well as in the agenda of higher studies and scientific research. It should be stressed that for many years both these issues were completely neglected and we have had to start literally from the scrap.

Today history of both Lithuanian Jews and Holocaust are incorporated into the textbooks of history, illustrated by documents, memoirs and photographs. The Holocaust is also discussed during the lessons of literature, ethics, and religion. This would be not possible to achieve without concerted efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science, International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and active Lithuanian non-governmental organisations.

Every year seminars for teachers are organised on teaching of Holocaust. Currently around 700 teachers are involved in this kind of activity. Over hundred books on history, culture and language of the Lithuanian Jews and the tragedy of Holocaust have been published in recent years.

Last autumn the Minister of Education and Science approved the Program of Holocaust Education Activities and its Implementation Measures that envisage specific activities at different levels and fields of the educational system. In 2003, the Foundation for Educational Change prepared a special website (www.holokaustosvietimas.smm.lt), which provides an access to the comprehensive information on Holocaust education activities in Lithuania.

Among other, I would like to emphasise one activity, which by personal involvement of school communities and students enables to reach primary objective of Holocaust education – to touch the minds and hearts of young people. More than 100 schools participated in the project “Jewish Neighbours of my Grandparents and Great-grandparents” organised by the Centre for Studies of the Holocaust and Jewish Culture in Lithuania “Atminties namai” (“House of Memory”). They carried out ethnographic studies collecting thousand memories about the everyday life of the Jewish community in their neighbourhood and of their fate during the Holocaust. These impressions were published in a book, which is popular among young people.

In addition with the measures in the formal educational system, the Government of Lithuania supports efforts to raise awareness of the general public about the history of Jewish community in Lithuania and the history of Holocaust.

Commemoration of the Holocaust Memorial Day honoured on September 23rd every year since 1994 has a special place in Holocaust education and awareness rising. In 2003, people of Lithuania commemorated the 60th anniversary of the annihilation of Vilnius Ghetto. President of the Republic of Lithuania, Prime Minister and Chairman of Parliament (Seimas) participated in this event and addressed Lithuanian people on numerous occasions. Official Israeli delegation, chaired by the Speaker of the Knesset Reuven Rivlin was among honoured guests of the program.

The Government spares no effort in preserving memory of the victims of the Holocaust and heritage of the Jewish community in Lithuania. A progress was made in expanding of marking the sites of mass killings with memorial plaques. The plans are under way to reconstruct the Paneriai (Ponary) memorial for the victims of Vilnius Ghetto. The permanent exposition on cultural heritage of Lithuanian Jews will open in June this year in renovated premises

of the Tolerance Centre. The Government adopted a decision to restore fragments of the historical Jewish quarter in the Jerusalem of Lithuania – Vilnius' Old Town. The first stage of reconstruction has already started.

It is important, however, to maintain the dialogue with the Jewish community in Lithuania and abroad in all these activities. Therefore, we look forward to the Second World Congress of Litvaks – the Jews having roots in Lithuania – that is organised by Lithuania Jewish community and will take place in Vilnius on 21-23 August 2004.

We believe that our sustained educational policy aimed at the whole society and young people in particular brings fruits. This year primarily civil society organisations first reacted to the anti-Semitic publications in one daily newspaper – more than 90 prominent individuals protested such manifestations. I can hardly imagine such reaction let's say five years ago. The reaction of Governmental institutions was also harsh.

Co-operation with the International Task Force has also played a vital role in promoting Holocaust education and tolerance, especially in the broader context such as education of military personnel or engagement of academic community.

I hope that our moderator Prof. Yehuda Bauer will be not angry, if I'll read his e-mail, sent a week ago to International Task Force: "Dear Colleagues, I think I already expressed a positive opinion about this new Lithuanian project. I am just a little bit concerned about the fact that Lithuanian projects are such a large part of our work. Not that I suggest to give less to Lithuania, but it means that we do not seem to be doing enough elsewhere."

I don't want to be complacent about such an important for us evaluation. I can assure you that Lithuania will do its best in order to be more and more active on Holocaust education and fighting anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia.