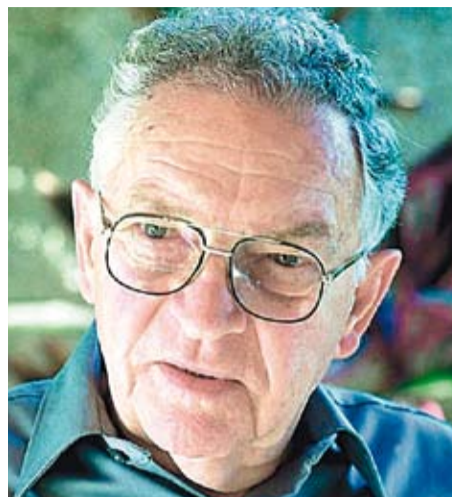




▲ **Efraim Zuroff:**
‘The harassment of Jewish partisans – that says to me more than these cultural festivals for dead Jews.’

▼ **Rachel Margolis:**
Dovid Katz says the low point in modern Lithuania’s history came the day prosecutors called for this former resistance fighter’s arrest.



▲ **Yitzhak Arad:**
The former Yad Vashem chairman was recently accused of war crimes in Lithuania for his activities in the partisan resistance

▼ **Lithuania’s ambassador to Israel, Asta Skaisgiryte-Liauskiene:** ‘Jews are part of our culture, and part of our mentality, heritage and history.’



← to Jewry, accusing the country of having a “powerful anti-Semitic establishment.”

At the same time, Katz, who has lived in Vilnius for the last 10 years, says he has been treated “exceptionally well by people everywhere in the city” and that he feels “proud to look, sound and feel very Jewish.” He also wrote a new book about Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews), which was commissioned by the Lithuanian culture ministry especially for the book fair (“Seven Kingdoms of the Litvaks”).

Yet he reports on a “dreadful and powerful anti-Semitic establishment that is based not among everyday people, but among the ‘elites’ of government and some of its agencies and some quasi-academic institutions.” In an e-mail interview with Haaretz, Katz complained, for example, about the so-called Red-Brown Commission, a government-sponsored study “whose purpose is not Holocaust denial but what I call Holocaust obfuscation – a plot to trivialize, minimize and ‘talk away’ the Holocaust by claiming that Nazi and Soviet crimes are ‘absolutely equal.’”

Like Zuroff, Katz is outraged that Lithuanian “politicians, prosecutors and quasi-academics in the service of revisionist history started to accuse Jewish Holocaust survivors of ‘war crimes’ if they escaped certain death to join the anti-Nazi partisan resistance movement in the for-

ests.” The first partisan to be accused was Arad, although all charges were dropped, in the wake of international pressure.

“The low point in the history of modern Lithuania,” said Katz, “came on May 5, 2008, when prosecutors sent two armed plainclothes police to look for Rachel Margolis and Fania Brantsovsky, two incredibly courageous Holocaust survivors who are heroes of the free world for having joined the anti-Nazi resistance in the forests of Lithuania.” Later that month, prosecutors said the women couldn’t be found – implying, according to Katz, that they were fugitives.

“Articles and media have continued to call both ‘murderers’ or ‘suspects of war crimes,’” he said. “We must not allow this shameful sham to continue unopposed, or for it to be covered up by even the most lavish and impressive cultural events.”

Although Katz was invited to participate in the fair’s “Yiddishland” seminar, he said he politely explained he would not be willing to come unless Margolis – a dual Lithuanian-Israeli citizen – was invited to join the Lithuanian delegation as a guest of honor for her achievement in rediscovering, deciphering and publishing the lost diary of the mass murder at Ponar, one of the most important documents of any witness to the Lithuanian Holocaust.

“They discreetly got back to me [saying] that nothing could be done,” Katz said, ex-

plaining his decision not to attend the fair.

Yet other intellectuals and officials – both Israelis and Lithuanians – said Zuroff’s and Katz’s criticism of the Lithuanian presence at the fair is exaggerated and misplaced.

“To speak about a plot is too strong,” said Skaisgiryte-Liauskiene, the Lithuanian ambassador. “Rachel Margolis was never accused of anything. Never. She was a witness in a legal case about the burning of a village, where men, women and children were burned alive. She could know about how this could have happened, so she was invited to [be a] witness. That’s it.”

Besides the participation of Arad, the invitation to historian Saulius Suziedelis is another sign that the Lithuanians are serious about the topic, said Ichokas Meras, a well-known Jewish-Lithuanian writer who was scheduled to appear on Thursday’s panel about language as an existential choice but who won’t be able attend because of his heart problems.

“Suziedelis is one of the best historians, he began to find out everything about how the Holocaust happened in Lithuania,” said Meras, a Holocaust survivor who moved from Lithuania to Israel in 1972. “Here in Israel, Jews don’t want to show anything positive about Lithuania.”

“There are people who only see the bad side, the black side of what happened,” he said. “Yes, it was bad. I went through it. But it’s necessary that Israel and Lithuania are in a good relationship, and I don’t see any propaganda here.”

Motti Zalkin, who teaches the history of Lithuanian Jewry at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and who will appear at Wednesday’s event on Yiddish, also says the criticism is unjustified. “I spent a lot of time in Lithuania, I’ve been to almost every shtetl, and I walk around with a *kip-pah* on my head,” he said. “I can’t recall a

single anti-Semitic incident.”

Zalkin said the harassment of Arad and Margolis was initiated by the judiciary rather than the government, and that whatever anti-Semitism exists in Lithuania is based on a rampant hatred of Russians. Jews, said Zalkin, were over-proportionally involved with the KGB – which is considered to have perpetrated a “Lithuanian genocide” – and it is in this light that anti-Jewish sentiments have to be evaluated. Zalkin pointed out that historian Tomas Venclova, “the first Lithuanian writer to say that the Lithuanians are collectively guilty for their role in the Holocaust,” will be on the panel. “We should welcome such efforts to promote this bilateral discourse via the cultural channel,” said Zalkin.

The organizers of the fair, meanwhile, are trying to stay away from the controversy.

“I am not a politician, I am just running a book fair,” said Zev Birger, the chairman, who was born in Lithuania. “I don’t know if it’s propaganda or not, but we’re offering a platform for discussions, and we invite people to come and ask questions and have a dialogue. The Lithuanians will have to reply, and by talking to each other, the truth will emerge.”

Birger, who moved to Israel in 1946, after having been liberated from Dachau – and who returned to his native Lithuania for the first time only two years ago – said he personally doesn’t believe the Lithuanians dealt correctly with their role in the Holocaust. He added, however, that he is happy about their eagerness to participate in this year’s fair.

“We believe that the exchange of literature and culture brings people together,” said Birger. “Because people know more about each other by reading the books of the other nation’s authors. And they’ll get closer to each other.”

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