Solomonas Atamukas. *Lietuvos žydų kelias nuo XIV a. iki XX a. pabaigos*. [The Way of the Jews in Lithuania Between the Fourteenth and the Late Twentieth Centuries]. Vilnius: Alma littera, 2001. Pp.456.
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A chance to speak about one's history freely encourages the rationalization of past events and less biased attitudes towards and evaluation of historical processes. Following the re-establishment of the independence of the country, Lithuanian historical scholarship has broadened, encompassing themes which previously were 'avoided'. Attention to the history of Lithuanian Jews and Jewish-Lithuanian relations has become increasingly popular, particularly since the start of the 1990s. This popularity, however, has been conditioned chiefly by political and cultural events. Undue politicization of events is usually devoid of truth, and theoretical deliberations are detached from reality. 'A happy relationship goes on the rocks. The unhappy finale becomes the starting point for searching questions. To explain the breakup of what once was whole, a story is told, and every element in the ensuing narrative will carry with it a clue about its conclusion'.¹ These ideas of three US historians (whose book, devoted to the problems of historical truth and objectivity, was recently translated into Lithuanian), in the opinion of this reviewer, are very suitable for characterizing the statements, scholarly publications and populist articles of the last decade, in which Lithuanian-Jewish topics have been marked by the stamp of the Shoah and of the unending partition of the 'wreath of the victim', continuing to be an obstacle to a comprehensive investigation of the culture and history of Lithuanian Jews. Therefore, any new endeavour to analyze the problematic issues of the Lithuanian Jewish history is also to be greeted in as much as it manages, on the basis of archival sources and irrefutable statements, withstanding constructive criticism, to repel premeditated approaches, subjective sympathies or ambitions and to reject the traditional images entrenched in historical consciousness. The published papers of conferences and other scholarly articles² cover a wide range of issues (sometimes very specific), related

¹ J. Appleby, L. Hunt, M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York–London, 1994) p. 263; J. Appleby, L. Hunt, M. Jacob, *Tiesos sakymas apie istoriją* (Vilnius, 1998).

² *Atminties dienos. Tarptautinės konferencijos Vilniaus geto sunaikinimo 50-čiui medžiaga* (Vilnius, 1995); *Vilniaus Gaonas ir žydų kultūros keliai. Tarptautinės mokslinės konferencijos medžiaga* (Vilnius, 1999); *Mokslinės konferencijos 'Katalikų bažnyčia ir lietuvių-žydų santykiai' medžiaga*. Lietuvos Mokslų Akademijos Metraštis, t. XIV (Vilnius, 1999).

to the history of the Jews in Lithuania. New monographs, however, have not appeared during the past decade with the exception the translation from Hebrew of *Trumpa žydų istorija Lietuvoje* (Vilnius, 2000) by Dov Levin, which has been treated rather controversially in academic circles. Therefore it is worthwhile looking once more at Atamukas' *Lietuvos žydų kelias*,³ which has already become a reference book for all those interested in the history, culture, education, economics, migration, etc., of the Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews), in their contribution to the development of the Lithuanian state and, in general, in the history of the Jewish nation. Apparently to protect himself against criticism, Atamukas stresses at the end of his monograph that many issues have not yet been disclosed. We, however, are interested primarily in the accents the author has placed in the six-centuries-old history of Lithuanian Jewry.

The author of the monograph is a historian, whose life and research experience is enormous. Most of his life having spent in Lithuania, he somehow unites the elements of the Jewish and Lithuanian cultures and personifies a traveller on the last leg of his Lithuanian journey in Jewish history described by him to his emigration to Israel. In contrast to other Lithuanian scientists and politicians, Atamukas openly speaks about his Communist activity, which began during the first Soviet occupation (1940), and afterwards about his work during the second occupation (after 1944) in the structures of the Communist Party. In his own words, he, as 'a former Soviet historian had to review his old views and opinions on the issues of the historical development of Lithuania against the background of the realities of the late twentieth century'. Nevertheless, he holds that 'in the critical evaluation of the deviations and perpetrations, committed in creating "Socialism" in the Soviet Union and in Lithuania it is impermissible to obliterate and disparage the positive and useful achievements' (p. 410).

The work under review is 'a result of long and painful deliberations, an evidence of a complex historical process' (p. 410); it an extension of a small booklet, presented to the public by the author as *Lietuvos žydai XIV–XX a.* [Lithuanian Jews from the 14th to the 20th Centuries] (Vilnius, 1990). Nearly after eight decades since the appearance of the first academic Lithuanian study of the Jewish community *Žydai Lietuvoje. Bruožai iš Lietuvos visuomenės istorijos XIV–XIX a.* [Jews in Lithuania. Features of Lithuanian social history between the 14th and 19th centuries] (Kaunas, 1923) by the Lithuanian lawyer Augustinas Janulaitis, Atamukas again 'opened the window to the Jewish world, unknown to Lithuanians'. However, with 'his suppressed sorrow for the misfortunes and tragedies

³ S. Kaubrys, E. Bendikaitė, 'Pamąstymai prie kelio...', (review of S. Atamukas, *Lietuvos žydų kelias*. ...), *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, t. 8 (Vilnius, 2000), pp. 110–115.

that had befallen his nation',⁴ he still had to shed light on the ins and outs of the most complex and most controversially treated period of the Lithuanian Jewish history. Most probably that is why the elementary proportion seemingly is not observed in the monograph, i.e., the history of five centuries – from the arrival of the Jews in Lithuania till the period of the first Republic of Lithuania – is reserved merely a quarter of the study, while the rest of the book is devoted solely to the twentieth century. A rich history of Lithuanian Jews is illustrated with an enormous wealth of factual material. The author makes an attempt to determine the degree of the phenomenism of the Litvak community and its 'real place' in the context of the world Jewry and Christian communities. Inserts of emotional descriptions of concrete events assimilate the style of a serious academic study with that of a journalistic essay. The narrative presentation of the material and opinions of other researchers sometimes makes reading the book difficult. Quotations from the works of Simon Dubnov, Berl Kohen (Kagan), Uriah Katzenelbogen, Mark Wisnitsner and other authors occupy several paragraphs, and the boundaries of the quotations proper are not always clear. That again leads to misunderstandings and difficulties to conduct polemics with the author. A meagre use of archival documents related to the period before WWII (only three references to such sources on the inter-war period) is 'compensated' by Atamukas by use of material from the archives of the Central Statistical Board of Soviet Lithuania, the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party and the Ministry for State Security, dealing with the second half of the twentieth century. A long list of citations (it is not clear why they are referred to as 'list of sources') of historical literature and sources in Lithuanian, Hebrew, Yiddish and other languages is a valuable feature of the study, because many of them are not accessible to Lithuanian researchers. Tables of statistical data (although without the indication of authorship), illustrating the tendencies of historical processes, suggestive iconographic material and the typographical quality make the publication attractive to both a scholar and a layperson. The second edition also contains an index. The author's endeavour to present an unbiased research is a continuation of a protracted search of a dialogue between the Jews and the Lithuanians, overcoming the past and accurately comprehending the processes that have taken place in Lithuania. Atamukas' book is a significant contribution to the history of the Lithuanian Jewish community, the development of the relations between the Lithuanians and the Jews and the process of getting rid of the negative stereotypes.

The author sees his wandering nation as neither saints nor angels: more than once he says that they were and/or are people with all kinds of individual traits and with various weaknesses and negative features. The majority of them, nonetheless, 'espoused sound principles of good

⁴ A. Piročkinas, 'Langas į Lietuvos žydų istoriją', *Voruta*, 1998 12 19.

and evil and adhered to them in practice' (pp. 32–33). The author is particularly responsive to the clichés, deeply entrenched in society as characteristics of the Jewish community. In his book he mentions a number of such widespread negative characteristics, usually attributed to Jews in historical writings and in oral tradition; and he does so (though not always persuasively) in order to expose their unfoundedness. The reader is not certain what scholarly arguments were in the author's mind when he made the following statements: 'Neither were Jews a foreign force in Lithuania, as somebody tried to prove; they did not deprive the Lithuanians and other nations of economic positions, they created them both for themselves and for Lithuania' (p. 67), or 'politically they [Jews] were the most reliable element: they did not cultivate any particular national ambitions, did not enforce and spread their faith, language or way of life ... the Lithuanians and the Belorussians did not consider the Jews and their activity harmful'.

The limitation of the object under review – Lithuanian Jews – and the emphasis on their uniqueness in the context of the history of world Jewry due to their specific intellectual nature and devotion to scholarship somehow suggests the attention of the writer to the revelation of the 'internal' history of this separate Jewish community. The metaphorical way of Lithuanian Jews is defined by the chronological milestones of Lithuanian statehood, i.e., the status of the Jews was closely dependent on the changes in the life of the state (p. 11). That, in its turn, conditions the author's priorities – the change of the state boundaries and governments, of the attitudes of the Christian society and in particular of the Lithuanians towards the Jews threads the entire research devoid of any endeavour to reveal a closed, little known Jewish community, generating not only the interest of the outsiders. Internal relations within the community are hardly dealt with except some remarks on Jewish sociality, mutual assistance and understanding.

In the preface to the book the author indicates as one of his major tasks 'to give a comprehensive picture of the main historical processes of Jewish life ... looking at them from a certain period as well as from the historical perspective' (p. 10). In a following chapter he reiterates that 'historical phenomena, events and facts can only be understood correctly in the context of the historical time, place and circumstances' (p. 116). Nevertheless, time-rested 'preconceived notions' provoked the author's generalizations and insights disregarding time boundaries and forestalling the natural course of events. Writing about the Jewish communities on the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Atamukas maintains that 'the sociological aspect of the essence of the Jewish way of life was the Jewish perception, more precisely, their awareness that the chances to preserve Jewishness, to have their own national and religious identity with their historical fate depends only on their close and resolute internal unity' (p. 31). Also unequivocal is the author's opinion about the Jewish choice

of 'recent times': 'a vital issue confronted the Jews – how to sustain their national vitality and dignity and how to live among other nations. There could be only one answer: the national revival of the Jews themselves' (p. 82). The movements of the Haskalah and Zionism, which started in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were particularly strong in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Lithuania as well. Following Ben Cion Dinur, Atamukas associates the roots of Zionism with the struggle for emancipation and civil and political equality (p. 83). This process stimulated the Jewish integration into and assimilation with the majority community side by side with which they lived. At that time traditionalism still dominated in the East. Accepting the statement that the sources of Zionism should be sought in the ideas of Eastern Jews who valued 'the traditional national spiritual heritage', it could be questioned whether in Eastern Europe, Russia and particularly in Lithuania, 'the tendencies of national enlightenment and the understanding of the necessity to reconstruct the practical way of life on the basis of one's own national values' were evident from the very beginning (p. 74). Writing about Jewish consciousness, the conception of common national interests and the defence of national ideals, the author puts forward the events, peculiar only to the era of nationalism. The nationalism of Eastern and Central Europe and modern anti-Semitism were effective catalysts in the history of Zionism. Zionism, none the less, was not their only product. The standpoint that anti-Semitism, produced by the process of emancipation, created Jewish nationalism and made Jews seek safe haven in the historical motherland, would impede the clarification of other forms of the reaction to the aforementioned phenomena. After the anti-Semitic events of 1880s emigration to America and South Africa outnumbered the Zionist movement and the new settlements in Palestine. One more form of reaction was the participation of the radically-minded young Jews of Russia in the revolutionary movement. Atamukas calls this movement democratic socialism, which affected world and Jewish history (p. 96). He is also familiar with conscious intents of the unconscious Lithuanian nation in the early nineteenth century: 'the Lithuanian and Belorussian nations did not require Jewish assimilation – they merely wanted Jews not to help the ruling nation [Russians] to assimilate them' (107).

The work under review could be considered oriented to a wide potential readership, and respectively the research material is presented in a most convincing and attractive manner. However, a tendency to submit the 'simplified' causes of the processes of Jewish history is also obvious. That is true of the Jewish involvement in the socialist movement (p. 95, 96) and Jewish-Lithuanian political co-operation (pp. 104–107). Citing the leaders of the Lithuanian national movement, he ascertains a place for the Jews in the framework of Lithuanian nationalism. In his work he stresses that 'a substantial part of the Lithuanian upper circles remained Polonized until the last decades of the nineteenth century, unconcerned of the wants

of their own people and other ethnic groups of the country, indifferent to the rallying of Jews for the common cause of Lithuania' and that 'even in perspective Lithuanian public figures did not consider Jews as their allies in the fight for freedom and statehood of Lithuania' (p. 102). The trends of integration, co-operation and confrontation of Lithuanian social groupings were directly linked to the perspectives of Lithuanian statehood. Different groupings nurtured different political aims, dependent not only on their self-determination but also on the general geopolitical situation in Europe. The development of contacts with other non-Lithuanian democratic and socialist parties and groups was practiced mostly by the Lithuanian Democrat and Social-Democrat Parties. In 1906 there was a stable Lithuanian-Jewish political bloc for the election to the State Duma of Russia. The bloc affected the political orientation of local Jews, and according to the author they were the most reliable political allies of Lithuanians in the liberation movement. 'The rapprochement of the socio-political forces of Lithuanians and Jews' did not mean any concurrence of the interests and aims of these nations. Atamukas remarks that the Lithuanian democratic forces made an agreement with the Jews following their failure to find a common language with the Polonized Lithuanians. At the same time he forgets to mention that Lithuanian Jews were not interested in supporting the Polish candidacies because of the anti-Semitic views of the well-known Polish nationalist Roman Dmowski.

Atamukas maintains that in the period of the first independent Republic of Lithuania the national life of Lithuanian Jews had 'entered a new and much higher phase – they occupied an important place in the life of the state' (p. 132). We do not think that anybody would be able to denounce with reason the contribution of Lithuanian Jews in defending the interests of the new state and in recognizing *de jure* its independence by other states. It would also be difficult to disprove the fact that a budding Jewish autonomy in Lithuania, unequalled anywhere else in Western and Central Europe, ended together with Lithuania's democracy. Reading about the tendencies of Lithuanian authorities towards discrimination, establishing the policy of civil inequality and radicalism of the internal life of the country (pp. 131–148), we do not find any descriptions of the actual implementation of such measures in real life. That is possibly due to the fact that in inter-war Lithuania a number of laws or their amendments in effect were not enforced in such spheres as the bar, price regulation, ranks, a palace of medicine, export and import, craftsman qualifications, holidays and rest days, the use of the Lithuanian language, ritual slaughter of animals, etc. Many of these laws were debated and amended or their implementation was postponed through the entire inter-war period.

The study of the relations between Lithuanian Jews and the society surrounding them is started by Atamukas with an unquestioned policy of tolerance of the Lithuanian rulers towards Jews. Here the author is interested primarily in the sequence of facts and an exceptional status of Jews

as a basis for the rights. At the same time a privilege could be a state act, protecting Jews from the already existing Judophobia by conferring rights on them as well as eliminating them from other communities. It is quite evident that the author paints an ideal picture of the Middle Ages and modern times, when the Jewish and Lithuanian communities enjoyed a period of peaceful coexistence: 'living together and carefully watching each other, Jews, Lithuanians and Belorussians got accustomed to each other, learned not to fear and to get along' (p. 32). One should not think that the author arrives at such and similar conclusions due to the lack of concrete evidence. The differences between Jews and Lithuanians did not disappear in the course of centuries – they lived side by side but not together, and their life was not integrated. It was only the territory on which they were living that joined them. The Jews and Lithuanians lived in a sort of two worlds, defined by separate customs and traditions of their communities. There must have existed a natural contention, separating Jews from the surrounding community due to the differences of estate, faith, culture, way of life, etc. Jews performed the function of the intermediaries between town and village, and gentry and peasants, but due to their 'difference' and incognizance they remained outside the moral and social space of the closed Christian society. In our opinion, the search for the evidence of harmonious relations was conditioned by the foreboding of the twentieth-century Jewish tragedy, emphasizing its historical unprecedentedness. The attempt to stress the positive aspects of the Jewish life in the diaspora backfires on the author, adhering to the traditional conception of the Lithuanian-Jewish coexistence. Taking into consideration the Shoah of the mid-twentieth century it becomes obvious that Atamukas' conclusions of separate chapters contradict his own materials (pp. 54, 132).

The century of the national liberation movements was crucial not only for the formation of the Lithuanian and Jewish consciousness, but also the rise of 'modern anti-Semitism' in Lithuania (p. 62). Atamukas' definition of anti-Semitism comprises 'occasional manifestations of anti-Semitism in Lithuania since old times', i.e., the cases of 'blood libel', anti-Jewish attacks, instigated by religious prejudices and intolerance, 'anti-Jewish sentiments of economic nature' and anti-Jewish statements and actions of extreme nationalists. The author uses the same term to refer to anti-Judaism and everyday, economical and racially ideological anti-Semitism. Although he himself remarks that that term appeared only in the late nineteenth century (p. 80), he nevertheless applies it to spontaneous vandalistic anti-Jewish actions of the Middle Ages and early modern times. Unconvincing too is the author's argument that in the Middle Ages Judophobia, which was 'the pivot of anti-Semitism', was instigated solely by the Catholic Church's disseminating religious anti-Jewish charges and prejudices. The national separateness of Jews and their internal isolation – 'the spiritual ghetto' – was a favourable environment for all kinds of

prejudices. The medieval hatred towards Jews, characteristic of the whole of Christian Europe, did not bypass the Grand Duchy of Lithuania either. Religious anti-Jewish phobia was supported by the writings of Augustinus Rotundus, Petrus Skarga, et al., presenting Jews as 'infidels and enemies of the Christians'.⁵ The real cause of the new phobia was the dissemination of Judaism in the GDL. The fear of the spread of Judaism was recorded in the Second and Third Lithuanian Statutes.⁶

Quoting Antanas Smetona's statements of the second decade of the twentieth century about the mobilization of the progressive Lithuanian, Belorussian, Polish and Jewish forces (p. 108), the author forgets benevolently that the future president and the National Democrats were against co-operation with other ethnic groups, as this would entail their strengthening at the expense of the Lithuanian cause and be a threat to the existence of the Lithuanian people. One more remark that Smetona's views (in 1913) reflected the opinion of a large layer of contemporary Lithuanian society is also doubtful (p. 108). Most probably that is wishful thinking on the part of the author, taking into account the subsequent authority and tolerance of the future president with respect to the national minorities.

Atamukas portrays Lithuanians and Jews as monolithic entities, assigning to them features of rational, 'historically sober' thinking and of the choice of action. The attitude of the Lithuanian people was not uniform with respect to Jews, let alone what each of the two communities considered better or worse for them in 1940–1941 (p. 213). In our opinion, at that time when the events were developing at frightful speed, there were very few both in Lithuania and throughout the world who could evaluate the situation soberly and determine what could be more detrimental for them. The author, however, is saved by a possibility of looking at the events from 'a historical perspective.

Atamukas pays great attention to the Lithuanian history of the middle and end of the twentieth century, repeating old schematic constructs; his aim is to justify and accept some and reject others. We believe that not every reader will be convinced by Atamukas' presentation of the interpretation of historical facts through the viewpoints of other researchers. He characterizes as historically unproven accusations a disproportionately large participation of Jews in revolutionary movements, allegedly Jews and Communists are to blame for the sufferings of the Lithuanian nation and the introduction of the Soviet occupational regime (pp. 207, 209, 308). Atamukas considers his aim to determine 'the factors of the Jewish Shoah, conditioned by Germans and Lithuanians, the causes of their origin, the motives of their manifestation and ways of activity' (p. 231). Following the

⁵ J. Šiaučiūnaitė, 'Žydai XVI a. Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės visuomenėje: fobijomis virtę stereotipai', *Kultūros barai*, no. 7/8, 1998, pp. 56–57.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 57–58.

investigator of the history of the Holocaust Raul Hilberg, he divides 'the subjects of history' into criminals, victims and observers. Accusing the Lithuanians of collaborating in the killings of their fellow citizens, Atamukas does not deem it necessary to present in detail 'the intention and purpose of the participants, the manner of their participation, scope and result', which is applied to the Jews in the investigation of the weight of their guilt.

The author of the book under review, being himself closely associated with the history of the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania, is favourably inclined to consider that Lithuanian anti-Semitism as 'a dangerous social phenomenon' disappeared after the Second World War, and that the harmony of relations was restored 'by living and working in friendship' (pp. 307, 344). The chief locomotive force of neo-Zionism was considered the 'unofficial' anti-Semitic policy, conducted by the Soviets. Taking that into consideration it is really difficult to comment with what kind of reservations one could talk about the equality that Jews were accorded in Soviet Lithuania (pp. 345–353). A question could also be raised of whether the popularity of the ideas of neo-Zionism and the emphasis on the statistics of emigration does not hide the author's fear of a historical phenomenon that in the seven centuries of the ups and downs in the life of Lithuanian Jews a real threat of losing the 'Litvak' identity appeared.

History is not a trial, aiming to recreate justice, to reveal the righteous and to condemn the guilty. Basing himself on the opinions of other researchers and on factual material, and seeing himself in the role of both the prosecuting and defence counsel, Atamukas has endeavoured to present an integrated history of Lithuanian Jews against the background of complex and controversial events. His history of the Lithuano-Jewish relations, sucking the readers into its whirlpool even in the face of fateful twentieth-century events, leaving them a chance to remain merely as observers without occupying the position of either attackers or defenders, accusers or justifiers. The processes naturally existing in human consciousness are not a reflection of the processes taking place in the historical consciousness of the nations. The historical way of Lithuanian Jews, as reproduced by Atamukas, is not based on the policy of deliberate veiling at the expense of objectivity. We are inclined to consider it a successful attempt to further the acquaintance of the two nations, their wish to find a common language and to correct the schematic images of the Lithuanian collective memory. On the other hand, we do not think that the author has presented a new paradigm of Jewish history. Atamukas has taken a beaten track through Jewish studies of Lithuania. He aimed to reveal all the aspects of the life of the Lithuanian Jewish community. Nevertheless, he failed to go outside the framework determining the production of an 'external' history. Explaining how the Jews lived, what their activities were, and how all that was treated by the outsiders, the author

apparently did not regard the view from the other side as important, i.e., he did not outline the attitude of the members of the Jewish community towards the Gentiles, surrounding them. Neither did he deal with moves towards integration, relations with the Catholic Church and state institutions. Atamukas was not concerned with the differentiating relations within the Jewish community and presenting the tendencies of the development in its internal life in greater detail.

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