

**Evaluation of
„The Institution of the Church during the Nazi Occupation in Lithuania”
by Dr. Arūnas Streikus**

A Streikus is one of the young historians, who consistently studies the situation of the Church and its activities during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, has issued a number of publications on this topic – articles, monographs. He also has prepared his doctoral dissertation on this topic and successfully defended it. His work being evaluated here is like a laconic condensed and other historians summation of the studies carried out by the author on Jewish holocaust performed during Nazi occupation and the reaction of Lithuanian Church to it. The work analyses only this single problem, therefore the title of the article „The Institution of the Church during the Nazi Occupation in Lithuania” is clearly too broad. While analysing the state of Lithuanian Church during Nazi occupation the author reveals a number of facts, which define this state and which before managed to escape from the study scope of other historians, however, the facts are only mentioned and only they relation to holocaust is analysed. It would mean that the statement is: “German civilian authorities were not intending to restore [...] the state of the Church which it possessed before the first Soviet occupation [...] the Church did not receive back neither their land nor real estate, religious press remained forbidden the same as some religious organisations”. (p. 4) “The initial favourable attitude of hierarchs of the Church towards the occupational authorities soon changed because of the actions of officers of the civilian administration: (p. 4) i.e. the attempt to forbid not only Vilnius (i.e. Polish) but also Lithuanian Kaunas theological seminary on 23 August 1941 (“such courses are undesirable”); the attempt to expropriate parish records and pass them to the state; closing of all catholic churches in Kaunas during a seeming epidemic which occurred at Christmas time (from 20 December 1941 till 10 February 1942), “moreover, civilian places of people concentration (theatres, cafes, etc.) were not closed” (p. 5). At the beginning of summer of 1942, general A. von Renteln commanded to close the faculty of Theology and Philosophy and offered the direction of VDU to remove the faculty from the structure of the university” (p. 5). Requirements of bishops (on 6-8 October 1942) to restore the property right of the Church, to return expropriated archives and parish records [...] to issue at least one catholic weekly and monthly [...] to permit catholic organisations [...] to cancel the prohibition of religious circles in schools, to let Lithuanian priests to provide spiritual services to Lithuanians transported to work in Germany” (p. 5) were not satisfied.

„Berlin tried to segregate the Church of these lands from the Apostolic Throne. The Nuncio of Vatican in Berlin was not allowed to contact bishops of occupied lands, and letters sent via mail were being checked” (p. 10). Arrests and imprisonments of clergy were abundant, although they were not as massive as the arrests during the 2nd Soviet occupation.

Through these facts collected and mentioned in the article, the state of the Church in Lithuania occupied by Nazis is revealed, and it was not better than during the Soviet occupations. Therefore, we should discuss whether the strict criticism of Bolshevik authorities, which persecuted the Church (the persecutions of Nazis were analogue), expressed by Church hierarchs during Nazi occupation could at the same time be criticism of Nazi (not only Bolshevik) policy?!

A model of thinking of the Soviet historiography that since Bolsheviks and Soviet authorities fought against Nazis, so all who criticised bolshevism are Nazis and accomplices of Nazi crimes (e.g. archbishop M. Reinys), is absurd. The absurdity of such thinking is supported by the facts that the Church in Lithuania occupied by Nazis was restricted provided in the article by A. Streikus.

Without its own press and mass media the Church could only protest or react to Nazi crimes in pastoral letters and only by means of mail checked by war censorship and Nazis. We should agree that then the criticism could be only indirect, the same as in case of the

Soviet oppression, when criticism (in pastoral letters, etc.) was expressed and understood indirectly, between the lines.

Therefore, the brave words written by Telšiai bishop, Justinas Staugaitis, in his pastoral letter on 12 July 1941 (!) take us by surprise:

“Also we should not forget that every person, insider or alien, friend or foe, is child of the same God, thus our brother. If he suffers, our duty is to help him as we can. Naturally the world cannot be ruled only by love, justice is also necessary. If someone commits or has committed bad things, he must be stopped and punished. But certain units of public authorities will do this. God, protect them from revenge and self-will” (p. 15).

Since A. Streikus quotes these words from the pastoral letter of bishop J. Staugaitis, the second part of the fifth conclusion seems strange: “information about protests of bishops against the persecution of Jews still cannot be supported by reliable historical sources” (p. 19).

It is too bravely claimed in several places of the paper that some statements of bishop V. Brizgys about the protests of bishops to Nazi officers cannot be supported by documents or at least other sources (p. 1, p. 13). Such possibility “to support the statements of bishop V. Brizgys” are searched in the diary of archbishop J. Skriveckas, who recorded various events of those times very laconically. It is a question whether archbishop J. Skriveckas knew everything that was happening even, for example, in the curia of Kaunas Archdiocese, even if he was striving to record everything in his diary, because, as A. Streikus notes, J. Skriveckas „continued to live in Linkuvėlė”, and work of the curia was practically led by bishop V. Brizgys. The fact that J. Skriveckas may have failed to record in his diary something that was done in the curia, is not *ipso facto* the denial of the statement of bishop V. Brizgys. For example, in page 13 of the paper and in publications by other authors it is doubted whether bishops have ever signed a protest letter addressed to Nazi authorities “right at the beginning of German occupation, when they had heard about the first executions of the Jews” (p. 13). Because the original of such protest was not encountered, and archbishop J. Skriveckas does not mention such letter in his diary, A. Streikus has presented a letter of bishop V. Borisevičius “To citizen NKGB general in Vilnius”, which was written on 3 January 1946, after his first short term imprisonment in Vilnius in December 1945. Bishop V. Borisevičius naturally did not know anything about the future discussion (which still continues) about the unreliable information received from bishop V. Brizgys on such protest signed by Lithuanian bishops. “Together with Lithuanian bishops we have filed a memorandum to German authorities striving to stop murder of Jews” [Lietuvos vyskupai kankiniai sovietiniam teisme¹. ed. A. Streikus, Vilnius, 2000, p.761.] - he wrote this way in the letter addressed to the head of NKGB in January 1946.

Because bishops who had to sign the letter were still alive in Lithuania, such statement of bishop V. Borisevičius put forward in his letter cannot be spurious and feigned. Only because archbishop J. Skriveckas did not mention such letter in his diary (although mentioned endeavours to express a protest on behalf of the head of curia of Kaunas Archdiocese), we cannot treat independent testimonies of bishops V. Borisevičius and V. Brizgys baseless and fictitious.

Thus we again have to doubt the fifth conclusion of the author “massacres of Jews were publicly condemned only by single priests of the provinces. Information about protests of bishops against persecution of Jews still cannot be based by reliable historical sources”. If the author wants to remain objective, this conclusion needs to be corrected. Not only speaking about the protests of bishops, but also in the part discussing and summarising studies of various authors it would be desirable not only see a general statement that “massacres of Jews were publicly condemned only by single priests of the provinces” but also find quantitative statistics of such protests presented in earlier publications (see ed. S. Binkienė, Ir be ginklo

¹ Lithuanian bishops martyrs in the Soviet trial.

kariai². V. 1967; Gyvybę ir duoną nešančios rankos³ vol. 1 V., 1997; vol. 2, V., 1999; Žydų gelbėjimas Lietuvoje II pasaulinio karo metais 1941-1944m.m⁴. List of names. V., 2001; Išgelbėję pasaulį... Žydų gelbėjimas Lietuvoje⁵, ed. D. Kuodytė, R. Stankevičius. V., 2001; A. Eidintas. Lietuvos žydų žudynių byla⁶. V., 2001; A. Gurevičiaus sąrašai⁷ V., 1999; P. G. Aring. Kai vaikai klausia. Žydų gyvenimo pėdsakai Lietuvoje⁸. Klaipėda, 1998; Mano senelių ir prosenelių kaimynai žydai⁹. V., 2002; A. Vasiliauskienė Filosofijos daktaras kunigas Juozapas Čepėnas¹⁰. V., 2001, p. 33; Šoa (Holokaustas) Lietuvoje¹¹. ed. J. Levinsonas. V., 2001; Žydų muziejus. Almanachas¹². ed. D. Epšceinaitė. V., 2001). I think that the statistical data provided in those publications could tell more precisely what is hidden behind the fifth conclusion “massacres of Jews were publicly condemned only by single priests of the provinces”. In p. 17 of the paper we read, “there were cases of a little bit undignified actions of Lithuanian priests in the presence of Holocaust. For example, one of the heads of Skuodas squad of rebels who participated in massacres of Jews was the chaplain of the Skuodas gymnasium, priest Lionginas Jankauskas”. In the propagandist literature of the Soviet times this priest was directly named the head of white bands, who with a gun in his hands forced “Soviet citizens” to the shooting trenches. However, priest Vaclovas Martinkus, who, by the way, saved and was hiding the famous poet of Jewish nationality, Alfonsas Bukontas, received similar accusations at that time.

Many things have been written in the Soviet propagandist “historiography” about priest L. Jankauskas–Jankus (1912-1968), as well as about priest V. Martinkus, because in emigration (USA) they were heads of the Balf, who “took their initiative to reorganise the activities – to give allowances not only to Lithuanians in Europe but also to Lithuanians in all world, especially to the exiles of Siberia” [Lietuvių enciklopedija¹³. Vol. 36. Boston, 1969, p. 263-264.]

During Soviet trials of the participants of massacres of Jews (who then were called Soviet citizens) various “testimonies” were wrung, also about heads and activists of “anti-Soviet” organizations that were active in the USA. It is desirable to study seriously the extent to which the testimonies forced by the Soviet security interrogators are based on other sources and documents. It is too bold to rely on the material of Soviet trial processes. Even the fragment about priest L. Jankauskas which is published in the book *Žydų muziejus*. V., 2001, p. 191. does not allow us to draw a conclusion that “one of the heads of Skuodas squad of rebels who participated in massacres of Jews was the chaplain of the Skuodas gymnasium, priest Lionginas Jankauskas”. It is a pity that the author of the writing does not provide the source on the basis of which he is claiming the fact. From the personal file of ordinand L. Jankauskas found in Telšiai curia, it becomes clear that before entering Telšiai Theological Seminary, he was a non-commissioned officer of the Lithuanian army, and his brother was a policeman in Telšiai. Naturally, it is possible that in the first days of war, when Germans pushed the Soviet Army from Skuodas, “the past of the young priest as a soldier and brother of a policeman revived”. For example, bishop emeritus A. Vaičius, who at that time was a pupil at Skuodas gymnasium, does not remember anything that could support the accusations to chaplain L. Jankauskas distributed in the Soviet press that he was misbehaving with gun

² Warriors without guns.

³ Hands bringing life and bread.

⁴ Rescue of Jews in Lithuania during the Second World War (1941-1944).

⁵ They saved the world ... rescue of Jews in Lithuania.

⁶ The case: the massacre of Lithuanian Jews.

⁷ Lists of A. Gurevičius.

⁸ When children ask. Traces of Jewish lives in Lithuania.

⁹ Jews that lived in the neighborhood of my grandparents and forefathers.

¹⁰ Doctor of philosophy priest Juozapas Čepėnas.

¹¹ Shoa (holocaust) in Lithuania.

¹² Jewish Museum. Almanac.

¹³ Lithuanian encyclopedia.

during the first days of Nazi occupation in July-August 1941. But at that time he had his vacation and was living at parents' place in Šatės; rarely visited Skuodas. He testified that when the academic year started, the chaplain was not a leader of a white band squad. Considering the attitude of the then bishops of Telšiai J. Staugaitis and V. Borisevičius, they would not have tolerated a priest misbehaving with a gun. Bishop A. Vaičius testifies that his classmate, Prof. Vacys Milius, the summer of 1941 has spent in Skuodas. We can ask him to share his memories of what the chaplain of his gymnasium, priest L. Jankauskas, was doing in July-August 1941. The material and testimonies recorded in Soviet trials need to be corrected today in free Lithuania according to the testimonies of witnesses who are still alive.

A few inaccuracies that must be corrected:

p. 17: "priest Pijus Andziulis MIC, who was hiding and taking care of 17 Jews in the cellar of the Marian cloister in Žemaičių Kalvarija". At that time priest P. Andziulis really was a provincial of Marians and lived in Kaunas in the house of Marians. Parsons of Žemaičių Kalvarija were Marian priests Klemensas Kačergis MIC (1940-1942) and Vladislovas Polonskis MIC (1942-1946). Thus those two priests monks Marians organised saving and hiding of Jews in Žemaičių Kalvarija at the request of bishop Vincentas Borisevičius, naturally with the agreement of their superior in Kaunas, provincial priest P. Andziulis.

Despite these defects and inaccuracies, the work is acceptable and may be published after the corrections are made.

Bishop Dr. Jonas Boruta