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Title: The Holocaust, the Jews of Lithuania and Blair's foreign policy

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Example citation: Allwork, L. (2012) The Holocaust, the Jews of Lithuania and Blair's foreign policy. Invited Keynote presented to: *The Holocaust, the Jews of Lithuania and Blair's Foreign Policy, Northampton Synagogue, 26 February 2012.*

Version: Speaker's Letter to Members of the Northampton Hebrew Congregation Regarding Dr Larissa Allwork's 2012 Holocaust Memorial Day Lecture

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Speaker's Letter to Members of the Northampton Hebrew Congregation Regarding Dr Larissa Allwork's 2012 Holocaust Memorial Day Lecture

I hope that this letter finds you well and enjoying a happy and prosperous 2013. I can't believe that it has almost been a year since the Annual HMD lecture on 26 February 2012, which I greatly enjoyed delivering and discussing with you afterwards. It has recently come to my attention that the lecture was reported in the Northampton Hebrew Congregation newsletter. While I am very pleased that my lecture was reported in the April 2012 edition, I was concerned by paragraphs 3 and 4 because while addressing parts of my talk I feel that further detail and clarification is needed on my approach to a complex, difficult, emotional and controversial subject. For this reason I attach the following notes:

- Lithuanians were subject to rule by the Soviet Union (1940-1941; 1944-1990) and Nazi Germany (1941-1944).
- Contemporary Lithuania is not an ultra-nationalist nation it is a liberal democracy, but like other European countries suffers with issues relating to the minority politics of ultra-nationalist far right-wing groups.
- The stereotype that equates all Jews with Communists has remained an issue in public life since independence (see the 1996 Jonas Mikelinškas controversy), but I would not describe this as a blanket Lithuanian mind-set or 'psyche'.
- The Kaunas (September 1962) and Vilnius (October 1962) trials in the Soviet Union resulted in the conviction of Lithuanian collaborators in the Holocaust, but in the period between the late 1940s and the 1980s, there were issues in relation to the West turning a 'Blind Eye' to Nazi era collaborators.
- Policies during the Stalinist era resulted in the erosion of Jewish communal life in Lithuania. For example, the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, re-established in 1944 was closed; while the Vilnius Great Synagogue, subjected to bombing during the Second World War was demolished in 1949.
- Since the end of Communism there have been efforts by the Lithuanian Jewish community, the Lithuanian government and international organisations to encourage a revival of Jewish community projects in Lithuania.
- The British/Lithuanian ITF 'Liaison project' was a specific set of actions that happened between 2000 and 2003. It comprised a number of important initiatives by British and Lithuanian politicians, NGOs, curators and educationalists.
- 'The Green House' which now houses 'The Holocaust Exhibition' does feel 'off the beaten track' in comparison with the Museum of Genocide Victims, which is located squarely in the city centre just off Gediminas Avenue. The Museum of Genocide Victims primarily focuses on Lithuania's experience under Communism.
- 'The Green House' is intimately connected to the 'Catastrophe' exhibition (1991) which was curated by Holocaust survivors and was the first exhibition devoted to the Holocaust in the Baltic States. The architecture of the 'Green House' site itself deserves ongoing government support and sensitive programmes of preservation and updating. After quite a delay during the 2000s, this renovation process was achieved in October 2010 with 'The Holocaust Exhibition'.
- The British/Lithuanian 'Liaison Project' was successful in that it aided Lithuania's integration into the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and promoted a number of teacher training and curatorial activities. However, despite the best efforts of this project and others like it, there still remain ongoing issues in relation to Holocaust era issues in Lithuania. For example, the failure to convict alleged Nazi war criminals deported from the US in the 1990s; the slow pace of Jewish communal restitution which began to be readdressed by Lithuanian legislation in June 2011 as well as ongoing anti-Semitism by Lithuanian ultra-nationalist factions (eg. A far right march through Vilnius on 11th March 2008; the anti-Semitic desecration of a Memorial Stone at the Paneriai Forest in July 2011).

I hope that this letter clarifies my approach. I hope that it articulates my respect for Lithuanian democracy and the Lithuanian Jewish community and its history. I hope that it makes clear my belief that by understanding the successes and limitations of international, national and regional Holocaust research, remembrance and education programmes, we can improve them for the future. Finally, I hope that it encourages constructive civic debate in the spirit of honesty, peace and the necessity of 'coming to terms' with negative pasts.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Larissa Allwork
The University of Northampton
21st February 2013