

# The street without a name

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Translated by Romas Kinka

The very first word which comes to mind when thinking about this subject is obscenity.

In J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* there's an episode where the writer Elizabeth Costello is reading Paul West's novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. Described in it is the execution of the elderly officers who had wanted to kill Adolf Hitler. The novel's protagonist is so disgusted by the naturalistic descriptions that she even calls all of it obscene. Obscene, because such things generally speaking cannot happen, and even if they do, they cannot be made public, they should be kept hidden, as has been done in all the slaughter houses of the world, that is, of course, if a person wishes to preserve his or her sanity

To write about the massacres of Jews in Lithuania is also obscene. When my book *Tamsa ir partneriai* (Darkness & Co) was published, I found out that it was considered even vulgar. And, alas, not for the same reasons that J. M. Coetzee was talking about through the lips of Elizabeth Costello. Why did I myself need such a book?

I was born in North Lithuania, on the edge of a small town<sup>1</sup>, to be more exact, on the territory of a former manorial estate, in one of the old houses with their roofs still covered with shingles and which had formerly housed the estate workers. Perhaps ten families of peasant, workers and servants lived there. To the south there was a lake, to the north on a hill there stood a mill, to the east through the tops of the trees one could see the twin-towered old, neo-Gothic style church, and to the west the brewery - a spirit distillery - built in 1907 by Jan Pszeddecki, the former lord of the manor.

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<sup>1</sup> The small town is Obeliai in the Rokiškis district municipality of Panevėžys County in northeast Lithuanian. The population in 2011 was 1074. Besides being the birth place of Sigitas Parulskis, Joe Slovo, the South African anti-apartheid activist, was also born there. (R.K.)

Even further to the north, beyond the wind mill, which had long ago ceased to catch any wind, amongst the bushes and the grass, there was an old cemetery. Gravestones decorated with large, incomprehensible, angular marks stood crooked in a variety of poses. We, the children living on the manorial estate, would often play war games there. The adults called the cemetery the Jewish cemetery. To tell the truth, the words 'Jewish cemetery' sounded very mysterious, almost like the words 'pirates' or 'treasure', because there had been no Jews in our small town for a long time. They were never mentioned - not at school, not at home. It was as if that cemetery was from the times of the Pyramids or the Acropolis.

It was in 2010, as it happens at the same time as when a volcano with a hard-to-pronounce name erupted in Iceland, I was visiting my relatives in London. My second cousin Ernestas and his wife Daiva, working at that time as cultural attaché at the Lithuanian embassy there, kindly suggested I come and stay with them and walk around the town, which I was visiting for the first time. On one of those days we visited the Imperial War Museum. The museums in Lithuania are very weak, mostly related to local history, the exhibits poor, regardless of whether it's art or history or some other kind of museum. I shan't go into any details but one thing at the Imperial War Museum really shocked, distressed and shamed me. In the section on the Holocaust I saw a diagram, showing where and how many Jews had been killed in Europe during World War II. And in that diagram I also found my own unfortunate small town in the north of Lithuania. With only the numbers and the bare facts: 1160 Jews were killed there by the Nazis and local collaborators. I don't know how to explain it but I suddenly felt unmasked. For 45 years of my life I had taken no interest in this subject, I had avoided it, evaded it, because, most probably, I had been afraid of the truth. And now this truth was formulated and presented in the form of dry facts. I myself now find it strange how that could have happened in the way it did. After 1990, when Lithuania regained its independence, I had already read about the participation of Lithuanians in the mass murder of Lithuania's Jews, had discussed it, had argued about it, but, all the same, I spoke about it as if it were just my own private, personal matter. As if it were only up to me to confirm the participation of Lithuanians in that slaughter or not. But what I had been thinking about had already been formulated and put on a wall in a museum a long time ago.

It could not have been clearer, it was public knowledge, and it was shameful. To me it was a shock. Something clicked in my head. And the worst, most unpleasant thing was the shame. The shame that I, like most Lithuanians, had in all manner of ways tried to avoid the simple truth. At that moment, in the Imperial War Museum in London I very clearly understood what the well-known conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus meant in Christian mythology.

In the autumn of 2010 I spent a couple of months as a Lithuanian writer in residence in Salzburg. During a conversation, a local writer asked me if anything had been written in Lithuania on the Holocaust. To tell the truth, I did remember a couple of writers but those books had been written a long time ago. But in present-day, independent Lithuania I could not think of any such works. Historians had already been working on this subject for a long while but writers for some reason had avoided it. That same evening I found a piece on the internet by the Lithuanian historian Arūnas Bubnys in which he writes about the mass killings of Jews in the Lithuanian countryside. In speaking about the Holocaust in Lithuania what was usually mentioned were the I felt suddenly unmasked of Vilnius and Kaunas, the Nazis, who had murdered the Jews, but I, like most Lithuanians knew very little about the fact that the slaughter took place in the countryside and about the fact that the special squads used were made up of a few Germans and several dozen Lithuanians. And only because we did not want to know. I did not want to know. And convenient conditions were created for our wish not to know. The vast majority of Lithuanians are still very reluctant to speak about this subject, and if they do, then most often they fall back on the same arguments: the Jews were shot by the German Nazis and a few Lithuanian degenerates, who perhaps were not even really Lithuanians; the majority of Jews were Communists and NKVD agents, and so their destruction under the prevailing conditions of war could be justified; when in 1940 Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet army, it was the Jews who met the Soviet tanks with flowers and then took a very active part in the structures of the occupying authorities; they were Soviet agitators and political leaders and they were the ones who also played a part in the deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia, and so on.

Another very strange, but perhaps no less relevant argument, which I would sometimes hear from my mother was that the Jews crucified Jesus Christ and that is why such a terrible

punishment was visited upon them. In reading the documents and memoirs about the torture, humiliation and murder of Jews in Lithuania, I came across this argument more than once. In some paradoxical way in the thinking of a Lithuanian Jesus Christ was not even a Jew. Perhaps it was this idea that prompted me in the novel to call the killing squads apostles and give them the names of Christ's disciples. Of course, that is literature, but I needed a form, a certain religious context, because in Lithuania at that time it was very strong. Even during the Soviet period for Lithuanians religion was one of the main forms of identity and resistance against the occupation. An even more important meaning to the national consciousness of Lithuanians was held by the Lithuanian language, and at the same time - Lithuanian literature. With the founding of Sajūdis, the Lithuanian independence movement, in its attempt to liberate Lithuania from the Soviet empire, poetry and folk songs were more important than weapons. At the Sajūdis rallies, talks were given by poets and writers, that is to say, by those who knew the Lithuanian language best and who wrote in it. Of course, the reputation of literature and those who create it is not the same today as it used to be, but, all the same, it seemed to me to be an important act of consciousness to write a book in Lithuanian about Lithuanians who took part in the massacres of Jews. And not just for me but for all of our people.

So this was the genesis of my novel *Tamsa ir partneriai* (Darkness & Co).

Why did I decide to write such a novel? In the West it would seem the subject has been covered comprehensively in books, in the many films, and in a whole host of memoirs. The victims and their executioners are now lying in the ground. The first thing that made my head spin was the opportunity to talk about something that in Lithuania was almost taboo. To write on a subject which carries risk, which is unpleasant, and with which one has to grapple like Jacob wrestling with the angel. And even before beginning to write, one already knows that one will at the very least be left with a limp, and certainly without any blessing.

What should one do about mass murder, about which both the executioners and the victims have something to say? How should one deal with the obscenity referred to by J. M. Coetzee? Do we really learn anything from the mistakes of the past, and if we do - do we

become better human beings, or do scum become even smarter and harder to bring to justice? Unfortunately, I was rebuked not for describing the executions but because I had taken on the subject, the subject of the killers of Jews.

I received all kinds of criticism: that the Jews had paid me, that I was defaming my motherland, - and perhaps because of that one of the epigraphs I chose was a line from Julian Barnes 'The greatest patriotism is to tell your country when it is behaving dishonourably, foolishly, viciously.' The book was received with controversy. On the one hand, I was awarded the title of Person of Tolerance 2012. On the other hand, I was called a traitor, a representative of the Holocaust industry, and so on. It was suggested that I write about homosexuals (meaning that the subject I had chosen to write about was sensationalist and I was courting cheap publicity). I was admonished for not writing about the members of the Lithuanian resistance that had been murdered by the Soviets, for not writing about the Jewish members of the NKVD, and so on. The biggest complaint which I received from a serious literary critic was that there was no repentance in my novel and for that reason it was not sincerely written and was only a part of the Holocaust industry. To tell the truth, I find unacceptable the point of view that literature in general has to do something: to repent, condemn, judge, that it has to be ideologically committed. At any rate, I became convinced that there exists in Lithuania the premise that if one writes on the subject of the mass murder of the Jews, one is after something shameful: money, attention, undeserved popularity. By the way, to my mind, for a writer to seek popularity and to be recompensed for his or her work is not a sin. It is just the fact that in Lithuania there is a very strong tendency to think that it is better not to take on the subject of the Jews. And if one does - one is guilty no matter what.

Repentance is a complicated matter. A person who repents publically, strenuously, will always be regarded with suspicion, because repentance is a very internal, subtle feeling. Like shame. From the time that I saw that diagram in the museum in London. when I read those number I was accompanied by a feeling of shame. By the way, my favourite Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who spent part of his life in exile, said that it doesn't matter what complexes a writer has, what's important is whether he is able to transform them into a fact of culture. I do not know if I was successful in turning my guilt into a fact of culture of any

quality. Some people turn guilt and shame into aggression, others, spurred on by such experiences take the path of awareness. I really cannot say if my book is just one more statistical achievement or rather a sign of awareness, of a more real relationship with existence. I don't know.

As regards repentance... I read a lot of documentary material, the interviews of Lithuanians who had directly participated in the mass killings and I was surprised that I found no repentance there. For example, here is an extract from the interview of a person who had taken part in the shooting of Jews: 'In the first group of Jews that had been brought here there were about 30 persons. We shot at them from a distance of 20 metres. Our group at that time shot about 300 people, mainly men. We took the things belonging to the shot Jews. I took two suitcases, in which there were two men's suits and a man's overcoat. Chrome-tanned boots, women's dresses, men's over and underclothes, some strips of material for women's overcoats, two watches - a wrist watch and a pocket one - and other things, which I took home with me.' The language used was like that in a statement with the facts set out with indifference. Indifference, that is the most terrible thing - complete indifference. That is how I wanted to portray the killers.

The director Peter Brook conducted an interesting experiment: he gave a student an extract from Peter Weiss's play *The Investigation (Die Ermittlung)* about Auschwitz (the experiment took place in the 1960s). In the extract there is a section about the bodies of people who had just been killed. The student read the piece with feeling, and his distress was felt and understood by the audience. He asked another student to read an extract about the Battle of Agincourt from *Henry V*, in which the English and the French who died are named. The student made the mistakes typical of amateurs: he read the piece in an elevated tone, with pathos, putting the accents in the wrong places. The audience did not know what to make of it. Then the director asked that the impressions raised by the Auschwitz victims be used to imagine the dead at the Battle of Agincourt, to realize that they were not just literary personages but living human beings, as alive as the victims of Auschwitz, like us. When the student read Shakespeare's text again, the audience became attentive, because the reader, feeling an emotional connection with the public, read the piece in a simple and appropriate manner. After this experiment, Peter Brook formulated some important questions: how

much time has to pass before a corpse becomes a historical corpse? After how many years does mass killing become romantic?

What in truth can literature do - to remind us, to resurrect memories, to connect them with the feelings of human beings today, to revive the relationship with the past, with suffering and repentance? So that those memories not be obscene, so that a writer not fall under the suspicion of wishing to profit from a tragedy? To tell the truth, all of our lives is a continual profiting from the dead. We are parasites, living off the bones of our ancestors, and there is nothing we can do to change that. Human beings today in all manner of ways try to avoid suffering. To tell the truth, I do not know if suffering has a cleansing, healing power. Let us take as an example Russia, whose people suffered so much during World War II. But it does not seem that they understand what a misfortune it is to continually suffer - up till today they rattle their sabres and threaten anyone who dares to not agree with their aggressiveness. It would seem that a person who has suffered a lot should be more understanding, more aware, better able to comprehend the suffering of his neighbour, but the opposite can be true. A person who has suffered a lot can become even more terrible, more cruel, he can become vengeful and resentful.

During the presentation of my novel at the Centre for Tolerance in Vilnius I was asked if I had any Jewish friends. I wasn't able to answer the question. I don't have any Jewish friends but I couldn't come up with an answer. Why? It was only later that I understood. They had all died - on 25 August 1941 all my potential friends were shot and buried in pits not far from a small town in the north of Lithuania. On the other side of the small town there are only the graves of their ancestors with dilapidated headstones.

Frances A. Yates in her book *The Art of Memory* writes about a mnemonic device. It's quite simple - a person wishing to remember information puts images into places he knows well, and then walking through those places in his thoughts, he can quite easily reproduce large amounts of information. Where a person is born and grows up is most often the place which he knows best. Let's agree that the small town of Obeliai is just such a place in my memory, a place I know well, but, alas, images are missing, a thousand Jews are missing, Jews who

were erased from the life of that small town, but they have not disappeared from my memory nor, as a consequence, from the map of existence.

To tell the truth, after everything I've said here I have a bad taste in my mouth. As if I've turned myself inside out to try to appear sincere but I don't believe in the sincerity of writers. A writer is very rarely sincere, he can't really be sincere, particularly if he wants to be a good writer. He only exploits that sincerity, he doesn't give in to it. He uses sincerity as a stylistic device. But there is one unpleasant and strange thing I can grasp, perhaps it's just a slight feeling: that the impetus for this text of mine to come into being, and I repeat that it's only a feeling - are the embers of anti-Semitism deep inside me and the fear and the shame to admit it.

P.S. My mother still lives on the edge of that small town, on the former territory of the manorial estate. She'll soon be eighty, she attends church diligently, likes to watch soap operas on TV, sympathises with all the poor souls and unfortunates of the world. I recently visited her and the subject of streets came up - she doesn't like the name of the street close by. I said to her what if we changed the name to Jewish Street? After all, the Jewish cemetery isn't far away, and, besides that, so many of them lived here before the war. My mother looked at me as if I'd said the most foolish thing imaginable. What are you talking about, she said with a wave of her hand. And in truth, what am I talking about here?

Sigitas Parulskis, 15 May 2015, Vilnius

*Translated from the Lithuanian by Romas Kinka*