

LITHUANIAN PRESIDENT STRONGLY DENIES EXONERATING NAZI WAR CRIMINALS

John M. Goshko November 15, 1991

NEW YORK, NOV. 14 -- Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis denied today that his government has exonerated thousands of people who had been condemned as Nazi war criminals and said that such allegations had damaged his newly independent country's drive for acceptance by the international community.

"It is not necessary to dwell on how unjust were the accusations that the Lithuanian government suddenly opened its jails and released thousands of war criminals who are now walking the streets of Vilnius," Landsbergis said in a speech to the American Jewish Committee.

The Lithuanian leader, who is in this country on a private visit, voiced special bitterness about a Sept. 5 New York Times report from Vilnius saying that since winning freedom from the Soviet Union, Lithuania has been giving certificates of exoneration to thousands of people convicted of war crimes by Soviet courts.

The Times article asserted that the aim of Lithuanian authorities is to annul the power that Soviet communist courts exercised in judging the World War II actions of Lithuanians when their country was overrun by Soviet troops then occupied two years later by Nazi Germany.

Most of the once-sizable Jewish community in Lithuania was systematically murdered by the Nazis, in many cases with Lithuanians'

collaboration. The Times article created a considerable stir among American Jewish groups, which demanded that Landsbergis explain what was happening.

Editors at the New York Times said today that their foreign editor, Bernard Gwertzman, was out of the country and the acting foreign editor, Michael Kaufman, was unavailable for comment. They said these are the only two Times editors authorized to comment on the matter.

The Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, which deals with war crimes, has sent a representative to Lithuania, and Landsbergis said he has promised full cooperation with any inquiries the Justice Department might want to make.

Several American Jewish organizations have looked into the situation. While representatives of some of these groups said it would be difficult to speak of a U.S. Jewish community position, they said there is a general sense that the Lithuanian government made some mistakes but is trying to distinguish between genuine war criminals and those who may have been accused unfairly by the Soviets.

"Some definitional and procedural questions about which cases need review remain," said David Harris, executive vice president of the American Jewish Committee. "However, Landsbergis's agreement to meet with us today to address these issues is a sign of goodwill."

More critical was Rabbi Marvin Hier, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who said in a phone interview from Los Angeles that his group is reserving judgment. "There is no question that they did a sloppy job, using people who were not qualified," he said, "and we have documentation that at least 11 people who we believe clearly are war

criminals have been exonerated. There may be hundreds more."

"We very much want the truth to be established," Landsbergis said today. "Sometimes, though, it is not so easy to determine where the truth lies."

He stressed it would be unjust to automatically accept war-crimes convictions based solely on confessions that may have been coerced or evidence that may have been fabricated by the Soviet KGB. In such cases, he said, more investigation is needed to try to determine whether the charges were justified.

He said that an inventory is being made of how many cases fit into that category, and he added that in instances where it is hard to find reliable evidence, his government will seek assistance from Israel, the United States and other Western countries that have information about war criminals.