



## Jón Baldvin Hanni

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**20 YEARS OF ESTONIA'S**

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## ÓHRÓÐRI UM EISTA SVARAÐ

Viðtal Sigurjóns M. Egilssonar á Sprengisandi (Bylgjunni sunnudaginn 28.08.) hefur ekkert dillt á eftir sér. Viðtalið er aðgengilegt á heimasíðu minni. Það skiptist í tvennt, annars vegna vildi Sigurjón fá að vita, hvers vegna ég hefði á sínum tíma tekið frumkvæði að stuðna við sjálfstæðisbaráttu Eystrasaltsþjóða og í framhaldi af því, hvort þetta væri fordæmshæfur smápjóð eins og Íslendingar gætu fylgt eftir í öðrum málum. Seinni hluti viðtalsins fjallar um innlend málefni.

Að því er varðar fordæmisgildið um stuðning smápjóðar við aðrar smápjóðir í lífshás nefndi ég, að ég vildi gjarnan að Ísland, í samvinnu við Norðurlönd og Eystrasaltsþjóða, tækju frumkvæði að því á alþjóðavettvangi að koma Palestínumönnum til hjálpar í neyð þeirra. Ég lýsti ofbeldi Ísraelsríkis gagnvart Palestínumönnum sem stærsta harmleik samtímans. Harmleik vegna þess að Ísraelsher kemur nú fram gagnvart undirokuðu og varnarlausu fólki með svipuðum hætti og þriðja ríki Hitlers kom fram gagnvart ofsóttu gyðingum.

Þetta kallaði á hörð viðbrögð frá Vilhjálmi Erni Vilhjálmsyni (<http://postdoc.blog.is/blog/postdoc/entry/1186112>). Vilhjálmur þessi brást við með því að segja mig hafa, í utanríkisráðherratið minni, haldið hlífiskildi yfir stríðsglæpamanni (Evald Mikson) sjálfur hefði ég haft dularfull tengsl við KGB á sínum tíma. Loks fór hann hinum verstu orðum eistnesku þjóðina fyrir meintar gyðingaofsóknir.

Askur Alas heitir eistneskur blaðamaður við Eesti Ekspress, eitt virtasta blað Eista. Hann er íslenskumaður góður. Hann hafði skrifað "svipmynd" af mér í blað sitt í tilefni af 20 ára afmæli endurreista sjálfstæðis Eista, þar sem hann rifjar upp ýmsar aðgerðir mínar þeim til stuðnings þeim tíma. Vilhjálmur Örn vék að þessari grein og taldi með öllu ástæðulaust að bera lof á Jóni sem hefði haldið verndarhendi yfir Evald Mikson, auk þess sem hann hrakryti eistnesku þjóðina fyrir gyðingaofsóknir, sem fyrr sagði.

Askur Alas las þennan óhróður Vilhjálms um eistnesku þjóðina og hrekur þær ávirðingar, sem hann ber á Eista, lið fyrir lið, í hófstílltri en vel rökstuddri ádrepu, sem hér fer á eftir á ensku.

## How an innocent story can turn out ugly

Askur Alas, journalist at Eesti Ekspress

A story I wrote in Estonian weekly newspaper Eesti Ekspress (called "A Man Who Dared") about **Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson** seems to have caused quite a stir in Iceland, only because I mentioned war criminal **Evald Mikson** there. I was shocked when I read a text by Icelandic archaeologist **Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson**, whom the Danes (as he lives in Denmark) ever consider a historian, as he writes himself. Mr Vilhjálmsson seems to gravely misinterpret my point about Baldvin Hannibalsson, Estonian attitude towards Jewish people and war criminals, and most importantly, Estonian history.

In my story, I was talking about the role Hannibalsson played as the foreign minister of Iceland at the end of which the Baltic countries got their independence back. Hannibalsson stood up and talked for us in NATO and elsewhere at times when others did not and we could not make our voice be heard – for example, Lennart Meri was thrown out of Copenhagen human rights conference because Gorbachov threatened to leave. Hannibalsson was the one

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came to the Baltics personally at turbulent times when Soviet special forces attacked unarmed people at Vilnius TV tower and tanks were on the streets. Perhaps the presence of a minimalist NATO state could, after all, make some change. When we proclaimed independence, Iceland the first country to recognize it, for which we are thankful for ever. On 20th of August we celebrated the 20th anniversary of re-establishment of Estonian state and it was devoted to Iceland. That's why I wrote an article about Hannibalsson.

Mr Vilhjálmsón, on the other hand, is interested only in the small passage mentioning probable war criminal, Icelandic citizen Evald Mikson, and showing Hannibalsson, Hans H. Luik (the editor of Eesti Ekspress) and even Estonia as shielders of war criminals. By distorting facts – or being simply not aware of them and misinterpreting - Mr Vilhjálmsón creates an image of Estonia as a small evil pro-Nazi, Jew-hating state. He thinks that the article was written by Hans H. Luik (though both in paper and internet version stands my name). Luik seems to be a bad person in my eyes especially because he visited Mikson's sons. I can assure that it is my article, not Hans Luik's, it was my idea to write about Hannibalsson, whom I happen to know, and that in Estonia owners do not interfere in journalistic process.

I mentioned Mikson only to point out that Hannibalsson demonstrated having backbone late too. Based on Eesti Ekspress Year Book 1993 I wrote that Hannibalsson canceled a visit to Iceland because notorious Nazi-hunter Efraim Zuroff had insulted Icelandic state (with outrageous comments connected to Mikson). What I was trying to say was: no one can tell Iceland what to do. But my good friend of Zuroff, Mr Vilhjálmsón seems to be biased to interpret this little passage as an attack. It's not.

In a country which respects the law, you can not and you may not make a criminal out of someone who has not been convicted by court of law. Zuroff demanded that Iceland should immediately prosecute Mikson based on evidence from KGB. How can one demand from a sovereign state that it should prosecute its citizen, if there is no evidence? No one even vaguely familiar with Soviet times could consider KGB files as trusted evidence, since fabrication of documents and forced-out testimonies was KGB's everyday reality. What has happened to the principle that one is guilty before convicted?

Only in 2001 (not in 1998, as Mr Vilhjálmsón writes), Mikson is considered war criminal by international commission (no Estonian citizens there) headed by Max Jakobson studying crimes in Estonia during the Second World War. But in 1992 there was no legal base to consider Mikson a war criminal and no ground to start investigation in Iceland based only on KGB documents, Hannibalsson was not shielding anyone. Using unreliable KGB documents as a basis for arrest and prosecution makes one no better than a murderous KGB agent. And by the way, there has been no court, since Mikson passed away long ago.

Strange: Mr Vilhjálmsón writes that "the whole world knows that Mikson's case was impeded by men like Mart Laar, Davíð Oddsson and Lennart Meri". Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar welcomed Zuroff and even handed over the KGB files. And it was Lennart Meri who initiated the Jakobson commission that put Mikson on par with war criminals. One has to accept that the research done by historians and conclusions drawn by the commission is a procedure that takes its time.

I do not intend to say that I disregard work done by Efraim Zuroff. I think he is doing important work bringing war criminals to justice. People who were war criminals should be brought to court, whatever their nationality. But I do not endorse Zuroff's methods when they disregard the rights of the accused and due process.

But most disappointing about Mr Vilhjálmsón's story are his false claims about Estonia. He claims that Estonians killed most of Jewish people already before German occupation in 1941. This is not true. Based on data provided by Jewish community in Estonia, there were around 4500 Jewish people in Estonia before the war. Before Germans, in 1940-1941 2500 Jews (56%) fled to the Soviet Union, 12% were mobilized into Red Army, 10% Jews were deported by communists to Siberia by NKVD (predecessor of KGB, that committed a lot of atrocities in those years. Coincidentally the most notorious chiefs, **Hans Grabbe** and **Mikhail Pasternak**, happen to be Jewish. Pasternak, for example, personally led NKVD squad that burned tens of peaceful families and their country homes to death; all in all about 120 Jews were working for NKVD; 30 000 Estonian people were forcefully deported, tens of thousands killed. But if we calculate percentage of Jewish population, then NKVD terrorized Jewish people even more than Estonians. Historian **Jaak Vahur** writes that by his sources, about 500 Jews were deported to Siberia and about 200 shot by NKVD. Under German occupations, about 900 Jews were executed. Valge concludes: "The number of Jewish people who suffered by Germans and Soviet repressions is nearly the same." But still Zuroff and Wiesenthal Organisation is not interested in Soviet executioners – none of them have been sought for or brought to justice (86 000 Nazi war criminals have been convicted).

22% of Jewish people living in Estonia or ca 929 were executed under Nazi regime (over 3% in Latvia, 136 000 in Lithuania). But the truth is, as Vilhjálmsón writes, that most of those who stayed, were killed. Those who stayed were afraid to flee to the Soviet Union – they feared

repressions they had witnessed. Estonian Jewish writer **Eugenia Gurin-Loov** has written that Soviet occupation disrupted all peaceful and active life of the small Jewish community. "Cultural autonomy with all its institutions was abolished in July 1940. In August all organisations, societies, unions and corporations were closed. Many Jewish people were repressed (by Soviet NKVD – A.A.) on July 14 1941. After German army occupied Estonia in 1941, all Jews who did not flee to Soviet Union, were murdered. After the war, Jewish cultural life was not reborn," writes Gurin-Loov. But let me stress it again: under Soviet occupation 1940-41, at least 450 Jews were sent to Siberia to die by communists, among them Jews themselves, under German occupation, ca 929 Jews were killed.

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Mr Vilhjálmsón writes that this summer some Estonians celebrated in Viljandi the German occupation of the country in 1940. First, Germans came in 1941. Second, to understand what happened in Viljandi you must know more about Estonian history. To simplify: no one celebrated German occupation, it would be like worshipping 700 years of under German slavery that preceded. Those few veterans were commemorating the driving out of Soviet occupants, who had already committed here in one year more crimes against humanity than anyone thinks possible. They deported to Siberia 450 Jews and tens of thousand Estonians. They separated children from mothers, fathers from wives and sent them in animal wagons to die. In Viljandi, they also commemorated those who were killed in the war fighting on German side. People were mobilized on both sides during the war, since we were twice occupied by Soviet Union and once by Germany, and many of them did not have a choice, and many hoped to drive out the evil that seemed greater with the help of another evil. What Estonians wanted most was to regain its independence, not to support fascism. Of course, we know that under Hitler's regime Estonia would have been completely destroyed, all people deported and we could not have celebrated 20th anniversary of freedom now. But in the most tragic course of events, a brother was forced to fight against brother. People died on both sides and the fact that the dead are commemorated, does not mean anyone is praising fascism. This has nothing to do with that whatsoever. But it is hard to understand.

Mr Vilhjálmsón also claims that "anti-semitism and praising of fascism is still acceptable in Estonia". This is simply not true, far from it. Maybe he should come to Estonia before making such claims and see for himself. Let me remind:

- Estonia was the first country in world where Jewish people were granted cultural autonomy in 1925, and Jewish people have recognized it with a certificate of merit. Soviet regime abolished the autonomy in the first year of occupation.
- At the time of Nazi occupations, there were Estonians who sheltered Jewish people at their homes, risking their lives (for example, well-known scholar **Uku Masing**).
- In 2003, three years before United Nations proclaimed 27th of January Holocaust Memorial Day, it had already been three years official day in this small "Nazi-state".
- Estonia is one of the not-so-many countries in the world where Nazi symbols (and Soviet) are banned by law and punishable.
- Just recently, a brand new Jewish synagogue was opened in Tallinn, capital of Estonia. The opening was attended by Vice Premier of Israel **Shimon Perez**. The President of Israel had come earlier to lay down the cornerstone. Would they have come here, if claims by Mr Vilhjálmsón were true?
- In 2003 our President **Arnold Rüütel**, and in 2005 Prime Minister **Andrus Ansip** officially apologized before Jewish people, that also among Estonian citizens there were people who participated in killing of Jewish people.

No one ever apologized to Estonians for gruesome murders, repressions and deportations that equaled with a death sentence, for things that were done by men like Grabbe and Pasternak. Things that can be considered a genocide. At the same time I am convinced that neither the few people working for NKVD extermination squads or the executioners in German SS do not characterize nations as a whole. One must not draw conclusion for the whole nation because of the actions of few.

But lets get back to the main point. Estonian-Icelandic relations have been very good for a long time and I am sure they will stay that way despite some bitter articles. Icelanders did at a crucial time a lot more than anyone would have expected. That is why one of the central squares in Tallinn is named after Iceland and that's why we remember people like Hannibalsson, especially on the 20th anniversary of re-establishing our independence, on the holiday devoted to Iceland.

Askur Alas



Opret profil for at se, hvad dine venner synes godt om.

## Deila á Facebook

## Skrifa ummæli

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Senda til jbh