



The Latvian Jewish Courier

THE SAEIMA OF LATVIA HAS PASSED A RESTITUTION LAW

5. Likumprojekts **Labas gribas atlīdzinājuma Latvijas ebreju kopienai likums**
par:64; pret:21; atturas:0
 (3. lasījums) (33 priekšlikumi)
 (Dok. Nr. **5373**) **Likums**
 Budžeta un finanšu (nodokļu) komisija

5. The bill **On Goodwill Reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia**
for: 64; against: 21; abstained: 0
 (3rd reading) (33 proposals)
 (Doc. Nr. **5373**) **The Law**
 The committee of budget and finance (taxation)

Above, in Latvian and English, is the very first official announcement on February 10, 2022 of the results of the Saeima's vote on the restitution bill

After many hours of discussion on Thursday, February 10, the Latvian Saeima passed a law regarding restitution in its final reading. The law "On Goodwill Reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia" passed by 64 to 21, and finally became law on February 21 after it had been signed and promulgated by the President of Latvia Egils Levits.

"The new law has been adopted to eliminate the historically unjust consequences that arose as a result of the Holocaust implemented by the Nazi totalitarian regime and the activities of the Soviet communist totalitarian regime in the territory of Latvia," according to a release from the Saeima press service.

Before the Second World War, Jewish religious organizations and members of the community owned schools, orphanages, hospitals, and culture centers. During the occupation by Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945, approximately 75,000 Jews—Latvian citizens—were murdered in Latvia. During the denationalization and after the restoration of the Republic of Latvia, the rights to this property could not be restored, since all members of these families had died as a result of the Holocaust or the repressions of the communist regime. For a long time, the issue of returning the property of cultural, public, educational, and other Jewish organizations of pre-war Latvia was not resolved, despite the repeated appeals of the Council of Jewish Communities to legislators and the government with a call to restore justice—historical and human. Over the years, this issue has been raised by foreign politicians who came to Latvia, as well as by the AJC delegation.

Annotations to the adopted law emphasized that the Republic of Latvia was not to blame for the deprivation of Jewish property and the Holocaust, but it would be ethical and fair for the restored state to compensate the Latvian Jewish community for real estate losses.

In total, the illegal appropriation of real estate from the Jewish community was calculated to be worth more than 47 million euros, based on the property belonging to the Jewish community on June 16, 1940 (the date of Soviet attacks on Latvian border posts and a Moscow ultimatum that effectively marked the start of three consecutive periods of occupation by Soviet, Nazi, and then Soviet forces again).

The law stipulates that the amount of the reimbursement will be 40 million euros, paid at a rate of 4 million euros per year. Payments will start in 2023 and be completed by the end of 2032.

Allocated reimbursement will be used only for the purposes and measures specified by law in Latvia, as well as for the provision of social and material assistance to those victims of the Holocaust who live outside Latvia. The Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund may use the allocated funds to finance such events and projects in Latvia that are related to religion, culture, education, science, health care, history, sports, charity, and the restoration and preservation of the Latvian Jewish cultural and historical heritage. It includes the maintenance and improvement of Holocaust memorial sites at Bīķernieki, Dreilīņi, Rumbula, Mežaparks, Šķēde, Daugavpils, and other places.

The money will also be used to support the work of organizations belonging to the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia, to promote the integration, unity, and development of civil society in Latvia, as well as to manage the property of the Jewish community and the foundation.

During the consideration of the bill in the Saeima, several dozen proposals and additions were submitted. All of them



In the main meeting hall of the Saeima

THE SAEIMA OF LATVIA HAS PASSED A RESTITUTION LAW (continued)



The building at 2 Abrenes Street in Riga—one of the focuses of restitution—was a Jewish vocational school in the 1920s and 1930s

were considered and taken into account. “With this law, the compensation of the Latvian Jewish community will be final, and thus any other claim rights of the Latvian Jewish community and the Riga Jewish Religious Congregation for the expropriated real estate will be terminated,” the Saeima release and the law said. Compensation for the Jewish community has been discussed in the Saeima for 15 years, but until now had not been resolved, despite repeated pressure from U.S. and Israeli officials.

Local Latvian politicians say that confronting the country’s past is essential for Latvia to look ahead. “It was a moral obligation,” said Martiņš Bondars, the chairman of the Latvian Parliament’s budget committee, who presented the law before the government body. “Only a country that is able to deal with its past has a future.”

“For the [Jewish] community, we hope now to turn the page and close the book of World War II and its legacy,” said Dmitry Krupnikov, head of the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund.

The decision accepted by the Saeima won swift recognition from the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken: “I commend Latvia’s ongoing work to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote education about this dark period in history. The bill passed by Latvia’s parliament shows true commitment to addressing Holocaust-era property theft.”

On February 15, the leaders of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, the American Jewish Committee, and the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities addressed an open letter to the president of Latvia, Egils Levits, in which they assured him that the Council of the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund, the foundation that will be responsible for receiving and managing these compensation funds, will operate with fairness and transparency and to the benefit of the Latvian Jewish community, to Latvian society in general, and to Holocaust survivors from Latvia.

THE CENTER FOR JUDAIC STUDIES’ NEWLY REDESIGNED ONLINE DATABASE “JEWS OF LATVIA: NAMES AND FATES, 1941-1945” HAS BEEN LAUNCHED



UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA
**Center for
Judaic Studies**

The online database “Jews of Latvia: Names and Fates, 1941-1945” (<http://names.lu.lv>) is an important source for Latvian Jewish history research. It was first launched in 2008 and now comprises more than 90,000 names of Jews who lived in Latvia on the eve of the Holocaust; the fate of approximately two-thirds of them has been determined so far. The website’s content is available in three languages: English, Russian, and Latvian.

Since the previous website was technically and visually outdated, in January 2022 a newly redesigned website was launched with the same URL: <http://names.lu.lv>. It offers improved functionality and search options, a modern design, and a number of new features.

In addition, new primary source materials—photos of the members of the Latvian Jewish community and personal details from their pre-war passports—were added. It is a result of a comprehensive survey of the pre-war passport collections held within the Latvian State Historical Archives. We believe that the enriched database will ensure that personal identities of the

once-vibrant Latvian Jewish community, wiped out during the Holocaust, is documented and the memory of perished victims is preserved.

The project of the database redesign with access to these new sources was led by the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia with the financial support of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, and the Uniting History Foundation.

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THE HISTORY OF THE RUMBULA MEMORIAL: A MONUMENT DEDICATED TO THE MASSACRED JEWS OF THE RIGA GHETTO

by Elie Valk, Chairman of the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel

We, the Jewish youth of Riga, and our parents (who have returned after being evacuated to the mainland U.S.S.R. or after completing service in the Red Army—most of them in the renowned 43rd Latvian division) knew that all of our relatives and other members of the Jewish community that had remained in Riga had been killed. We did not know how this happened, or where, since several places were known to be sites of mass executions carried out during the years of occupation. But, in 1962, discussions began among 15–16-year-old Jewish youth that the massacre happened in Rumbula. Soon thereafter, Jews of the older generation went to Rumbula, 12 kilometers south of Riga, searching for traces of those terrifying events, interviewing local residents—there was a *kolkhoz* not too far away. It was then that we found out that Jews were driven from the ghetto through the snow and into the freezing cold—this occurred in November-December.



The Jewish youth of Riga clean and shape the grave mounds in Rumbula in 1964

We determined the approximate locations of the executions, and, most important, found and thoroughly interviewed two Jewish women—Frida Michelson and Ella Medalie—who had survived the massacre in Rumbula. Frida, for the first time, told us the story of how she managed to escape: she fell in the pit and was immediately covered by shoes and other objects worn by the ghetto inmates, who were forced to undress before being shot. That night, she climbed out of the pit, made her way to some nearby houses, and was saved by local Latvians. Ella's and Frida's saviors were later recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among Nations.

So, this is how we learned that this horrifying event took place in Rumbula. On April 19, 1963—on the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto—we got word that an important event would be held in Rumbula, and that everyone who can should gather. And many came. All of this was happening during the years of the Soviet regime, which affected the psychology of the participants in a particular way. So much so that when Bubi Zeitlin (an organizer of the event who later did a lot to memorialize the tragedy, but in 1963 was almost entirely unknown) went around and filmed what was going on with a 8mm camera, not only did two young men nearly beat him, they exposed the film to daylight (having decided that he was a KGB agent, their behavior would have been completely logical for the time).

After this first gathering, a group of 6-7 young men began to go to Rumbula regularly and (under adult supervision) took care of the mass graves. It was discovered that the first execution took place on November 30. The day before, 300 Soviet prisoners of war had been driven there and forced to dig six large graves in which the murdered Jews would be buried. Jeckeln, the executioner of Kiev's Babi Yar, went to Riga and perfected his method of execution and burial of the dead (which he named a "sardine method"), where the victims are forced to lie the pits, layer by layer, and shot from above. He even ordered his German (and then his Latvian) assistants to

ensure that mothers took their children and pressed them to their chest so that the killers could take both of their lives with one shot and save cartridges.

Telling further the story of our deeds—we continued going to Rumbula regularly to level the ground on the graves. One of these pits we considered a children's grave because of the many children's bones, pieces of skulls, and belongings that we found while moving the earth. And now, 50 years later when we come to Rumbula, we approach this grave and remember. One could say that this work in Rumbula tempered the entire Zionist underground in Riga—gathering there, we shared not only news on Israel and aliya but also samizdat (self-published literature censored, banned, and made illegal in the U.S.S.R.). And, on the way there, we would act unacceptably by Soviet standards, singing our specially written song "Bus № 30." (The № 30 bus went from the center of Riga to

Rumbula). We also sang Israeli songs in Hebrew, which were not welcomed by our parents on the bus, who were afraid that by singing these songs we would draw down some kind of misfortune on ourselves. But things worked out in the end, and, if someone was arrested, it was not for this.

One of the first memorials at the site of the executions was a barbed wire Star of David stretched between two trees. Then, a shield made of plywood was installed with a figure of a Jew rising from his grave, fist raised, painted on it. This piece of plywood was installed so that it could be seen from the train passing along the nearby railway from Riga to Moscow. There was also an *elektrichka* from Riga to Rumbula that many of us took to get there, and its passengers always saw this sign as they approached. Later, a five-meter-high board was installed there to which we attached a photocopy of the Kuzkovsky painting *On the Last Way* (thanks to the efforts of David Garber, one of the first activists of our work in Rumbula, this painting, today called *Babi Yar*, is installed in the Knesset in Jerusalem).

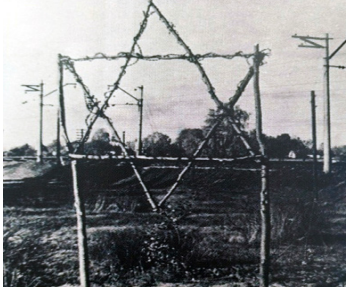


A view of one of the graves prepared by the activists

The first rally in Rumbula took place in November or at the very beginning of December 1963. A group of Riga Jews addressed the regional executive committee with a letter requesting to conduct a rally at the site of their murdered relatives' execution. To sign this letter, David Garber and Bubi Zeitlin tried to find several party members who held prominent positions and so, in the end, the rally was allowed (stipulating the participation of local authorities as well). And the authorities, of course, this time and in the following years, sent soldiers from nearby military units, with

THE HISTORY OF THE RUMBULA MEMORIAL: A MONUMENT DEDICATED TO THE MASSACRED JEWS OF THE RIGA GHETTO (continued)

one primary task: drown out our singing of Zionist and Yiddish songs (songs like “Zog nisht keinmol az du geist dem leztn weg”) with the powerful sounds of a military orchestra or the singing of Soviet songs. Still, the first rally went well.



A large six-pointed star made from barbed wire was installed by activists over the massacre site to be visible from the railway



A shield with a drawing of a Jew rising from his grave was installed in the line of sight of the passengers of trains passing nearby

After much improvement work, the Rumbula site took final shape in 1970, and that year's rally was prepared with special care. Then, as before, several people prepared the whole program. Each young man was assigned a poem either by Bialik, or Shaul Tchernikhovsky, or an excerpt from a book about the Warsaw ghetto, to declaim. Of course, prayer was always a part of the ceremony—it was necessary to say Kaddish, it was necessary to read “*El mole rachamim*,” and “*Izkor*.” That year's event was held 5-6 months after the famous highjacking attempt—the majority of participants were residents of Riga. Many people were arrested and searches were conducted in many homes. Many gathered at our memorial event in Rumbula, but the atmosphere was tense—no one dared start the program. Then, in this tense atmosphere, I stepped forward to read Kaddish (since, unfortunately, I have known Kaddish from childhood—my father passed away when I was 7 years old, and I said this prayer every year at Yahrzeit). Later, many friends said that it broke the tension, enabling the prepared program to begin. I remember this every time we stand in Rumbula—not at the modern, remarkable monument, a menorah made from barbed wire, but at a simple stone on which the inscription “Victims of fascism” in Yiddish was permitted after a long struggle, but without mentioning the word JEWS. It was one of the few monuments in the Soviet Union where words were written in Yiddish. This monument of ours was erected in 1964, but the struggle for permission to install it began much earlier. Our people went to Moscow, and succeeded, generally, in breaking through. Honor and glory to those of our countrymen, the older generation. Today, unfortunately, almost none of them are with us, those who not only managed to achieve a Yiddish inscription but also inspired the younger generation to return to their roots through the memory of the dead.

Some have asserted that the Jews of Riga were prompted to search for the place of death of Jews in the Rumbula Forest by Yevtushenko's 1961 poem “Babi Yar.” I think that those of our parents' generations, whom I mentioned earlier—Wagenheim, Zeitlin, Gordon, and others, hardly needed a push from Yevtushenko's poem. This poem really produced an explosion in the minds of not only Jews, but also other sectors of the Soviet population. But we didn't need Yevtushenko in Riga. We knew the song “*Zog nisht kein mol az du geist...*,” a song written in the Vilnius ghetto, we knew about

Babi Yar. There were already samizdat that mentioned or discussed that massacre. But for our gatherings it was not necessary.

Since 1990, memorial ceremonies have been held in Rumbula, at the site of the tragedy, at the end of November. Every year, the highest officials of Latvia speak—the president, the prime minister, the speaker of Saeima, the mayor of Riga. Among other things, they always say variations of the same phrase, the literal essence of which is “We are sorry that among those who helped the occupiers kill Jews were the sons of our people.” And, here, they add that we must also remember those Latvians who saved the Jews—indeed, in Riga, at the ruins of the large Choral Synagogue on Gogol Street, a wall (monument) has been erected on which are shown the names (more than 400) of Latvians who saved Jews. In Yad Vashem, where I am a member of the Council for Recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations, 133 people from Latvia have been recognized as such. Among them are many Russians, Poles, Baltic Germans who lived in Latvia. But the majority, of course, are Latvians. And the most famous of them, in honor of whom a museum exists in Riga—Zhanis Lipke. A movie was recently made about him. Zhanis Lipke created a whole network to rescue Jews from the ghetto and to hide them. They lived at his house at first, and later he found shelter for them on farms throughout Latvia. In total, Lipke saved more than 50 Jews. In 1977, when leaving the Soviet Union was not at all easy, Lipke was allowed to visit his son in Australia. But on the way, our activists in Israel (immigrants from Latvia) managed to bring him to Israel, where Yad Vashem awarded him an honorary diploma and where he planted a Tree of Honor, which still stands at the entrance to the Memorial.



The first monument erected in Rumbula in 1964 by Jewish activists

Every year since 1952, our association has conducted a memorial service (or, as we call it in Hebrew, *Atzeret Zikaron*). We always hold it during the last few days of November or the beginning of December to honor and remember the events in Rumbula. It is important to note that Jews in Latvia were not only killed in Rumbula—only 25,000 of the 73,000 Jews who perished in Latvia died there. There are many small towns, shtetls, in which all of the Jews were killed. No one even remembers them. And because of this we remember them at our ceremony here, which took place on December 8 this year. A PowerPoint presentation was given telling the story of 14 such small communities. We are also investing efforts to make sure that younger generations do not forget these terrible events. Toward this goal, every two years, and sometimes every year, we organize trips to Latvia called “*Shorashim ve-Zikaron*” (roots and memory). We bring to Latvia those who were born in Israel; they go and acquaint themselves with the places that their parents and ancestors came from.

Translation from Russian language by Daniel Feoktistov

WHAT IS UNKNOWN ABOUT THE RESCUE OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS AT THE END OF WWII

by Clarence Schwab

Editor's Note:

The following article pays tribute to the memory of an outstanding Latvian Jew, Gilel Storch, whose feats only a few know. June 2022 marks the 120th anniversary of his birth—a significant date in Jewish tradition. However, 80 years ago, Gilel Storch, from a well-known Zionist family in Latvia, became a key leader in large-scale rescue efforts of Jews launched from Sweden. He closely communicated with the highest statesmen of Sweden and, using the available opportunities, organized effective assistance to prisoners during the war. Beginning in February 1945, in the very last months of the war, when the Nazis made plans to destroy thousands of prisoners in the concentration camps, Storch found a way to approach the highest ranked figure of the SS and saved—under very complicated conditions—the lives of many thousands of Jewish prisoners in Ravensbrück, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt, and other camps.

After the war, Storch organized the purchase of undelivered Swedish granite originally intended for a Hitler victory arch. This granite he made sure would be used, instead, to build the monument in Warsaw that still stands today, which commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

In 1952, King Gustav VI of Sweden awarded Storch the country's highest honor—the Order of Vasa, 1st class. The Gilel Storch Award, established in 2018, is given to individuals who, through outstanding activities, have contributed to promoting democratic, humanistic, and universal values. The award committee is chaired by Marcus Storch, son of Gilel Storch and former Chairman of the Nobel Foundation. This year's 2022 Gilel Storch Award was extended to Polish activist, writer, and publicist Adam Michnik for his lifelong struggle against oppression.

Regretfully, in other countries, including in Latvia, few know the name of our hero. On December 28, 2021, the Jews in Latvia Museum in Riga organized a Zoom lecture in memory of Gilel Storch with the purpose of familiarizing more people with the life and achievements of this extraordinary person. The following article was written especially for the Courier by Clarence Schwab, a grandson of our wonderful compatriot.

Like some JSL members reading this, I am the son of a Holocaust survivor, Professor George Schwab, and the grandson of a rescuer, Gilel Storch. The Nazis and their collaborators murdered 29 members of my family—ripping from me even richer connections to family and heritage. But the circumstances of my father's survival and my grandfather's insistence on coming to the aid of others have always inspired me.

Let me share with you one relatively unknown rescue effort of my grandfather's, may his memory be for blessing. Over a 90-day period, starting in February 1945, my grandfather, Gilel Storch, living in Sweden, helps keep many imprisoned Jews alive in German concentration camps.

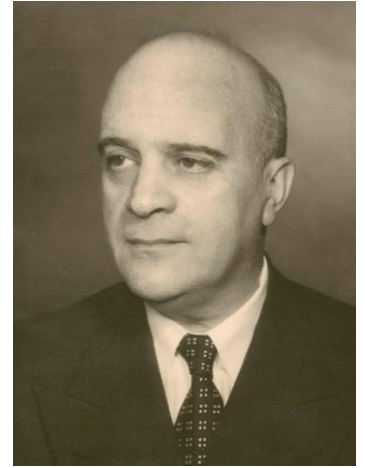
A successful businessman in Riga, Storch flies to Stockholm in July 1940 on a six-day business visa just as the

Soviets invade Latvia. Well-placed contacts in Sweden helped him obtain the visa as he was a reliable supplier of phosphate (important for food production) to Sweden. As a stateless refugee who did not speak Swedish, he nonetheless manages to bring his wife and young daughter—my mother—from Soviet-occupied Latvia to Stockholm the following year. But after the Nazis invade Latvia in July 1941, he could not save other family members and his early attempts to rescue other Jews from the Nazis also failed.

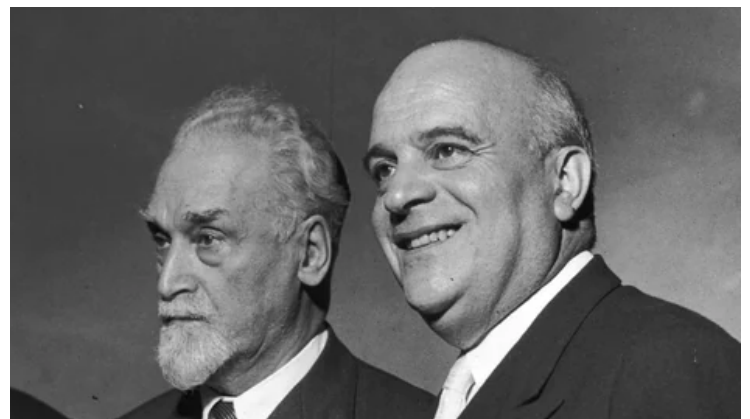
Understanding the scale of the unfolding catastrophe, he realizes the enormous resources needed for large-scale rescue efforts. Previously a representative of the Jewish Agency in Latvia—helping thousands of Jews, including his youngest sister, make Aliyah to Palestine before World War II—he becomes a representative of the Jewish Agency in Scandinavia and of its rescue committee. He also establishes the Swedish section of the World Jewish Congress and is its driving force, developing important contacts with Swedish and U.S. government officials.

A turning point occurs mid-1942 when a Nazi agent approaches Storch suggesting he could help ransom Jews. My grandfather seizes this opportunity because that overture indicates Nazis place a value on Jews. He understands then the importance of maintaining contact with the Nazis to try to keep Jews alive.

He and fellow collaborators develop rescue efforts and tirelessly try to implement them. Many fail. But several succeed. One of which begins in February 1945.



Gilel Storch



Gilel Storch with Rabbi Mordechai Nurock, an outstanding Jewish religious figure and statesman in Latvia and Israel

Storch learns of Hitler's orders to kill remaining concentration camp inmates in Germany—between 350,000 and 400,000. Nazis will either blow up camps with inmates inside or initiate death marches.

WHAT IS UNKNOWN ABOUT THE RESCUE OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS AT THE END OF WWII (continued)



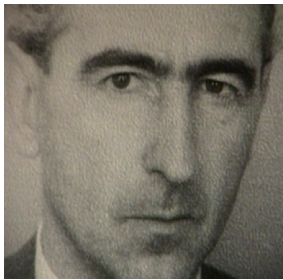
*Count Folke Bernadotte—
an associate of Storch—
Swedish diplomat and
Vice-President of the
Swedish Red Cross*

He helps persuade the Swedish Foreign Office to formally convey, on February 13, to the German government Sweden's willingness to receive all Jews imprisoned in Germany without restriction.

However, my grandfather learns that Sweden does not yet prioritize transporting non-Scandinavians to Sweden. Instead, Sweden focuses on securing Himmler's approval for the Swedish Red Cross to transport only Scandinavian

POWs by bus from concentration camps in Germany to Sweden.

Given the imminent destruction of several hundred thousand additional lives, Storch then decides he must establish direct contact and initiate concrete negotiations with the one person uniquely positioned to stop Hitler's directives: the architect of the Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler. Himmler oversees the concentration camps and is the executioner of European Jews, including 18 of my grandfather's and his wife's family.



In June 1944, Storch was approached by Peter Kleist, from the German Foreign Office. Kleist offered 2,000 Latvian Jews in exchange first for cash, then for medical supplies. The Swedish Foreign Office was unwilling to bring that many Jews to Sweden. Germans decided not to kill the remaining Latvian Jews then, but instead to move them to East Prussia work camps.

One avenue in particular proves especially useful. In Stockholm, on February 25, through a mutual friend, my grandfather meets Himmler's masseur, Felix Kersten. Himmler relies on Kersten for gastrointestinal relief, trusts him, and discusses various matters with him. That day, Storch presses Kersten to ask Himmler to nullify Hitler's concentration camp order. My grandfather apparently, according to Kersten, subsequently gives Kersten the impression that he can help Kersten after the war, including perhaps with South American passports, the ability to possibly live in America, and introductions in the U.S.

On March 3, Kersten flies to Germany on a scheduled visit to his patient. He represents the Swedish Foreign Minister, who is keen to secure Himmler's approval for the Swedish Red Cross transport initiative. In addition, Kersten brings with him my grandfather's major overtures.

Kersten negotiates over many days with Himmler on my grandfather's behalf. Storch used three related psychological insights in these negotiations. These insights help answer

the questions: Why would Himmler talk to a Jew? Why could a Jew influence Himmler to not carry out orders?

First, Himmler actually believes Jews controlled the strings behind the world's governments, and he believes Storch is a key player in that Jewish world government.

Second, my grandfather communicates that the war will end poorly for Germany. Perhaps Himmler's actions now regarding Jews could help him later.

Third, Himmler has begun to think independently of Hitler. He wants to open direct negotiations with the West to arrange a separate peace, so the U.S., Britain, and Germany together could repel the Bolshevik invasion of Western Europe. Himmler believes Storch could be useful in establishing such contact.

Kersten returns to Sweden on March 22 with a letter from Himmler meant for my grandfather; it certified written assurances beyond expectations. Himmler assures that: (1) he will not pass along Hitler's orders to blow up concentration camps along with all the prisoners; (2) concentration camps will be surrendered to the Allies according to regulation with white flags hoisted; (3) he forbids the continued killing of Jews and that Jews will be placed on equal terms with the other concentration camp prisoners; and (4) that concentration camps will not be vacated and that all prisoners will receive packages of foodstuffs from Sweden.

In addition, Kersten informs that, on Kersten's suggestion, Himmler agreed to meet with Storch to continue negotiations in person. Himmler assures safe conduct, stating, "Nothing will happen to Herr Storch; I pledge my honor and my life on that." Surprising, Himmler guaranteeing the safety of a Jew!

Although repulsed by the thought, my grandfather nonetheless consents, again to gain time for the prisoners. Kersten awaits word.

Storch's breakthroughs with Himmler, and his further requests, help persuade the Swedish Foreign Office to expand the now-operational Red Cross bus mandate to include non-Scandinavians, including a "quantity of Jews, in case it was deemed appropriate and no inconvenience could be feared to arise from it."

Although Sweden supports my grandfather's negotiations, the U.S. State Department and the British government do not. Instead, they attempt to obstruct them. The U.S. State Department does not pass on my grandfather's March 27 telegram to Rabbi Steven Wise at the World Jewish Congress in New York. The British Foreign Office does not pass on his messages to intended



*Felix Kersten and
Heinrich Himmler*

WHAT IS UNKNOWN ABOUT THE RESCUE OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS AT THE END OF WWII (continued)



Tage Erlander, Prime Minister of Sweden, with his friend Gilel Storch

recipients at the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Agency in London. In a letter prepared for Winston Churchill on the matter, the British Foreign Secretary recommends against British involvement. Churchill replies in a note, "I agree. No truck with Himmler."

Despite these obstacles, Storch shapes events on the ground. Very skeptical of Himmler's following through on any promises, he works to verify and re-confirm Himmler's actions through Kersten, Count Bernadotte (head of the Swedish Red Cross whom my grandfa-

ther had worked with on rescue efforts), and through several other Nazis aligned with Himmler. Each, in effect, becomes my grandfather's representative in this effort. He instructs. They act and report back.

On April 7, for instance, two Nazi government representatives each separately inform my grandfather at around midnight that Himmler's second-in-command, loyal to Hitler, just issued orders for Bergen-Belsen to be blown up the next morning. Storch acts immediately. He and Kersten call Himmler's adjutant from Kersten's apartment, on a phone line specifically set up by Himmler to get hold of his masseur at a moment's notice.

Upon his return from Germany, Bernadotte delivers a personal letter from Himmler's adjutant to Kersten dated April 8—meant for my grandfather. It informs that Bergen-Belsen had been assigned a more "humanitarian" commandant and that the International Red Cross had received permission to visit Theresienstadt. Bernadotte also reports to Storch what Himmler's adjutant told him, namely that Himmler frustrated the directives to blow up Bergen-Belsen.

On April 15, the Germans hand over Bergen-Belsen intact with about 60,000 surviving inmates.

In a subsequent meeting with Himmler, Bernadotte reports on April 17 that Himmler confirms that concentration camps in Germany will not be evacuated and will be handed over intact. Bernadotte also reports all Scandinavian Jews, 423 in total, from Theresienstadt and neighboring camps, will arrive in Sweden the next day. My grandfather writes back to add Ravensbrück to the Red Cross convoys (as Himmler had already agreed to this).

Now, after several delays, Himmler invites Storch to meet with him on April 19. What was certain: the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald (though partly evacuated) and the freeing of Scandinavian Jews from Theresienstadt.

Kersten's ongoing communications and Bernadotte's meetings with Himmler (to verify and re-confirm promises) suggest the trip would not gain much. Given these and other considerations, my grandfather decides, two hours before his flight, that one of his colleagues go in his stead. His colleague had not been part of the lengthy and delicate negotiations, but courageously agrees to travel with Kersten.

Although the meeting is held and does shine a light on Himmler's mind, as expected, the meeting accomplishes little more than what had already been agreed upon. Himmler keeps his promise and agrees then to have 1,000 Jewish women from Ravensbrück brought to Sweden on Swedish Red Cross convoys, with more concessions to come.

Those concessions come the following day, April 21. Fulfilling Storch's request, Bernadotte, in a meeting with Himmler, secures the release of all females from Ravensbrück.

And so, within 90 days of Storch's unconventional thought, all remaining camps in Germany are handed over intact. The Swedish Red Cross brings about 6,500 Jews to Sweden at that time and thousands more after the war.



Memorial dedicated to the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, built on the initiative and partial financial support of Gilel Storch

When the women arrive in Sweden, my grandfather visits them in hospitals and brings each a lipstick, so each woman could feel beautiful again. He works with newly arrived refugees and reunites families. He helps create new families by covering the costs of many weddings. And he lends money without ever taking a receipt.

And yet, he always felt he could have done more.

In summary, to save lives, my grandfather ventured where few did. By thinking unconventionally, by understanding others' needs, by acting promptly, and by pushing. And, even after repeated failures, and the prospect of further failure, not giving up.

I share this story in the hope some hear about it. Become inspired—knowing such actions did take place and, therefore, can take place. And, because of that knowledge, at some point, try to do something to protect humanity, even from itself.

Material compiled by Semyon Gizunterman

ABRAHAM SOLOMON FREIDUS: LIBRARIAN, JUDAIC SCHOLAR

In the fall of 2010 we began to compile articles about outstanding Jews from Latvia to be included in the Latvian Jewish Encyclopedia, planned for publishing by the Shamir society in Riga. The following is an article prepared for the aforementioned volume.

Freidus, Abraham Solomon (1867-1923) was a librarian and bibliographer born and raised in Riga. Alongside his studies at heder and his knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew, he mastered Russian and German. He then learned French, after moving from Riga to Paris in 1886 in hopes of furthering his education. Having failed to achieve what he wanted in Paris, he left for Palestine in 1887, where he did harsh physical labor in the settlement of Zichron-Yaakov. Unfortunately, he fell ill with malaria and briefly returned to Paris before moving to London a few months later and ultimately settling in New York in 1889. At first, Freidus worked on a farm in Connecticut; after returning to New York some time later, he began teaching Hebrew and French. He also wrote articles in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English for the local newspapers. He then studied at the Pratt Institute School of Information (Pratt Institute Library School at the time), from which he graduated in 1894. After his training in library cataloging, Freidus worked as a cataloguer at the General Theological Seminary. In February of 1897, he took a job at the New York Public Library. It was at this time that the Department of Jewish Literature (Department of Hebraica and Judaica) was created in the library from the collection of books donated by the then-richest philanthropist, J. Schiff. Soon after, in November of 1897, Freidus was appointed as the department's head and worked in that position until the end of his life. Over the years of Freidus's work, the department became the most authoritative collection of Jewish printed works in the world.



*"Irritating Personality"
(artist Saul Raskin, issue #50
of the magazine Der groyser
Kundes, March 1911)*

Freidus's most significant achievement was the first developed classification system for Jewish literature, containing more than 500 categories. It was also very consistent and easily accessible, allowing the later adaptation for use in many other American repositories. Due to his outstanding bibliographic knowledge, Freidus became and remains an indispensable guide for many scientists in search of necessary materials.

Along with the classification, Freidus compiled a bibliographic card index of the books in his department, which

had reached 25,000 units by the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition, Freidus prepared a bibliography of literature on diverse, but important topics such as Jewish women, Jewish



weddings and divorce, anti-Semitic periodicals related to the rejection of Judaism, Jewish folk songs, the history of Jewish music, Hebrew grammar and dictionaries, etc.

The significance of the creation of the Department of Judaism, along with Freidus's exceptional knowledge and amazing dedication to his work, was manifested between 1901 and 1906, during which a large team of authors prepared a 12-volume *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Almost all participants in this unique project met with him regularly and discussed their articles,



*"The East Side bookworm:
Mr. Freidus of the Astor Library"
(artist "Sam" for Der Kibetser
magazine, December 1911)*

Sadly, Freidus's outstanding journey of life came to a close when he unexpectedly fell dead on the morning of October 2, 1923, near the library building on his way to work.

*By Ivar Brod
Translated by Aviva Solovey*

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE



Thirty years ago, in January 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the Republic of Latvia and the State of Israel. In fact, Israel recognized Latvia immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain on September 4, 1991. The Israeli Embassy in Latvia opened in October 1992;

the Latvian Embassy opened in Israel in February 1995.

Israel is currently a regular trading partner of Latvia, especially in the areas of ICT, biotechnology, the food industry, and tourism. The nations engage in significant cooperation in the field of cybersecurity.

Both sides consistently characterize bilateral relations as good and constructive, with mutual visits at the highest levels taking place. Here, I would especially like to note that on July 28, 2013, Israeli President Shimon Peres paid an official three-day visit to Latvia, during which he not only met with the leadership of the Republic of Latvia, but also participated in the opening of the Zhanis Lipke Memorial.

Since 2001, citizens of both countries have enjoyed visa-free entry between the two countries. About 4,000 Latvian Jews live in Israel (according to Wikipedia)—they are the bridge connecting the two states. According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, more than 400 Israeli citizens permanently reside in Latvia.



Ambassador of Israel to Latvia, Ms. Sharon Rappaport-Palgi

On the eve of the 30th anniversary of the establishing of diplomatic relations between the two nations, the Ambassador of Israel to Latvia, Sharon Rappaport-Palgi, gave a long interview to Latvian Television; she spoke not only about the contribution of the embassy to cooperation in the fields of culture, business, and social projects in Latvia, but also shared the problems Israel faces in relation to its permanent pain points—Iran and Hamas.

The *Courier* editorial board planned to open the News section of the current issue with a report on the state visit of the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, to Israel that was to take place March 6-8. However, the visit was postponed because of the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine.

Instead, we would like to share the message (delivered



Jews pray at the Wailing Wall for Ukraine's victory

in Ukrainian) to the people of Ukraine from Egils Levits, president of Latvia. Below is his message translated into English:



The President of Latvia, Egils Levits, and his wife Andra Levite address the people and the President of Ukraine

"Dear heroic Ukrainian people! My dear friend President Zelensky! All of Latvia is with you in thoughts, work, and prayers. Together we shall overcome the Russian invasion and defeat Putin's regime. Ukraine belongs in Europe, with us! I support and call on all the leaders of Europe to expedite the admission of Ukraine to the European Union, to assign it the status of a candidate country without delay. Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!"

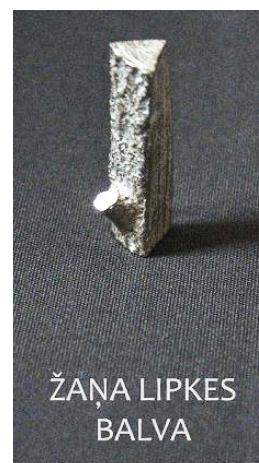
It was also announced on March 1 that the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has been awarded the Order of Viesturs. The motto of the Order of Viesturs seems particularly appropriate: *"Confortamini et pugnatē"* ("Be strong and fight").



On February 1, we celebrated the 122nd birthday of the great Latvian Zhanis Lipke, who saved at least 55 Jews during World War II. Within the first months of the occupation, Lipke organized a unique rescue operation, in which he involved more than 20 associates who were so successful that not a single serious failure occurred.

In 2018, the Zhanis Lipke Memorial established the "Silver Log" badge of honor (see below), which is awarded to a person who has made an in-

valuable contribution to the rescue of Latvian Jews. If necessary, the award is given to the honoree's descendants. In 2022, the honor was awarded to Lipke's associate, Emilia Abele. This woman, born in 1903, who spoke Russian, German, and Estonian at the beginning of the occupation, helped hide a Jew, a dentist Villi Frisch, in a shelter and provided him food. Emilia's help was especially effective in 1944, when the surviving prisoners of the ghetto were transported for slave labor to the Kaiserwald concentration camp. Then Emilia



ŽAŅA LIPKES BALVA

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

managed to find Lipke, who took Villi Frisch to his Mezhamaki hiding place in Dobele. From that moment, Emilia became Zhanis's associate. As Lipke himself wrote in his memoirs, Emilia, who worked in a military hospital, "got medicines for us that would otherwise be unavailable." Later, Emilia and Villi Frisch married. And, in 2021, Emilia's granddaughter, dentist Rebeka Eichmann, donated photographs, personal belongings, and recollections of Emilia Abele to the Lipke Museum.



Emilia Abele and Villi Frisch with their son Egon, and Emilia's son Ivar from her first marriage, circa 1950



Bikernieki Memorial, January 27, 2022

International Holocaust Remembrance Day was observed in Latvia on January 27, 2022, with a ceremony held at the Bikernieki Memorial. Here, between 1941 and 1944, an estimated 35,000 people were massacred—primarily Jewish men, women, and children, as well as prisoners of war and opponents of the Nazi regime.

The prayers were conducted by Rabbi Kalev Krelin of the Riga Jewish religious community, Pastor Funtars Dimants of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Father Aivars Līcis of the Roman Catholic Church in Latvia, and Jānis Dravants, high priest of the Latvian Orthodox Church. The memorial ceremony was attended by Latvian officials, foreign ambassadors, including the U.S. Ambassador John L. Carwile, and members of the Jewish community, who laid wreaths and flowers at the base of the memorial.

On January 27, 2022, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the historian and founder of the Jews in Latvia Museum Dr. Margers Vestermanis was awarded a certificate of gratitude and appreciation from the State of Israel for his relentless efforts on behalf of and lifelong contribution to Holocaust research and remembrance.

The ceremony took place at the Riga Jewish Community building and was attended by the Minister of Justice Jānis



Dr. Margers Vestermanis speaks in response

Bordāns, the Minister of the Interior Marija Golubeva, other state officials, foreign ambassadors, historical researchers, representatives of the Jewish community, colleagues, and friends. The event was hosted by the director of the Jews in Latvia Museum Ilya Lensky.



The certificate of gratitude was presented to Margers Vestermanis by the Ambassador of Israel to Latvia Sharon Rappaport-Palgi.

The Head of the Chancellery of the President of Latvia Andris Teikmanis emphasized in his address that Margers Vestermanis has a special place in the history of Latvia, in Latvian society, and in our hearts, and expressed his deepest respect and gratitude.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs sent a letter of congratulations to Margers Vestermanis, which was read by the head of the Latvian delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Einārs Miķelsons.

Director Marta Herca presented an upcoming film about Vestermanis. The students at the Latvian College of Culture specially for this evening, together with the director Juris Jonelis, prepared readings of the diaries of Latvian Jewish girls who were killed in the Holocaust. The compositions selected by Dr. Vestermanis were performed by a trio of musicians from the Liepaja Symphony Orchestra.

In his acceptance speech, Vestermanis said: "Today I am especially excited to be rewarded and praised by the country of our forefathers, the country of great hopes of the Jewish people—Israel. This once again confirms my closest connection with my people, with the Jewish people".

The members of Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the U.S.A. cordially congratulate Margers Vestermanis and wish him good health, strength, and energy for further fruitful work!

From December 27 to February 5, the National Library of Latvia hosted the "Jewish Artists in Interwar Latvia: In Search Of" exhibition—showcasing oil paintings, watercolors, and graphics. The original smaller version of this exhibit was held in the summer of 2020 in the gallery of the Rietumu Bank headquarters. Even then, the organizers announced plans for an expanded exposition, which finally came to fruition.



General view of the exhibition

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)



Kol Nidre, the famous painting by artist Mikhail Io

A significant part of the exhibition reflected various aspects of the work of the artist Mikhail Io (Iofe), including his paintings dedicated to Jewish themes, lithographs of Old Riga, works reflecting his activities in scenography, book illustrations, and poster design. Where possible, the works of other artists were also fully represented: the emotional paintings of Mikhail (Mozus) Parparov about Jewish life, the graphic works of Isaac Fried-

lander, the works from different periods of the artists' lives, including Bernard Danengirsh, Samuil Haskin, and David Shkolnik.

Visitors were enchanted by paintings with views of Riga—The Powder Tower, the back streets of the Latgale suburb. The exhibition also featured many documentary materials, including catalogues of exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s. In preparing this exhibition, works from the collections of the National Art Museum; the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation; the Museum of Literature and Music; the Jews in Latvia Museum; the archives of the Latvian National Library; and private collections were on display. Many of the works showcased have not been exhibited for decades.



The Corner of Gogol and Jēzusbaznīcas Streets, a painting by artist Mikhail Io, in which a part of the building of the Gogol-Shul Choral Synagogue is visible at the top right

During the virtual tour, director of the Jews in Latvia Museum Ilya Lensky and curator of the exhibition Natalya Evseeva said that the exhibited works are only the visible part of the iceberg. A lot has not yet been found, every year more and more new historical evidence is discovered.

On January 22, 2022, Professor Andrew Ezergailis, a prominent American historian of Latvian origin, one of the most prolific researchers of the Holocaust in Latvia, died at his home in Ithaca, New York, at the age of 92.

Professor Ezergailis was born in Latvia in 1930 in the Jekab-

pils region into the family of a former red rifleman. In 1944 the family emigrated to Germany, then in 1949 to the U.S. In 1964 he graduated from the University of Michigan, and, in the same year, he began working at Ithaca College, being appointed a professor there in 1971. In the first years of his work, he specialized in the historical issues of Russia and Europe, as well as the history of the Second World War.

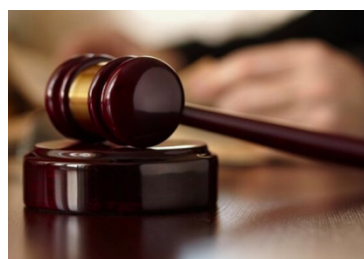
From 1980 on, the Holocaust in Latvia became the main subject of his research, with documents from the German archives becoming the material for his work. His article "What Was the Arāja Team" (1988) was the first Western study that reached Latvian audiences. However, it is the monograph "Holocaust in German-Occupied Latvia" (1996/1999), published in English and Latvian, that remains the most important comprehensive work in that field. There is no doubt that his research will be widely used and discussed among professionals and the broader public for decades to come.

Some publications of Professor Ezergailis regarding the participation of Latvian nationalists in the murders of Jews caused controversy within the Jewish community of Latvia, the surviving former prisoners of the Riga ghetto.

Professor Ezergailis was a foreign member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. In 2007 he was awarded the Latvian Order of the Three Stars, and, in 2012—the Great Medal of the Latvian Academy of Sciences.



Andrew Ezergailis speaks at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1999 at a conference on the Holocaust in the Baltics. Members of the JSL Council also met with him at this conference.



As reported on January 20 of this year by the Delfi news portal, the Vidzeme Regional Court of Riga sentenced Donats Gaidis to 250 hours of forced labor for offensive remarks against Jews posted on the Internet.

In 2018, Gaidis left offensive comments on the news portal **vesti.lv**. In particular, he wrote that he had hated Jews all his life and was "ready to kill" them with his own hands. "Go away to your promised land. When I come to power, I will certainly send them to the promised land so that they can share the desert with the Arabs," the convicted wrote in one of the comments. He left the first comment under the nickname "Anti-Semite," under the second comment, in place of the author's picture, he left the phrase: "To drive away and beat the Jews with a stake."

On December 30, the Jewish community of Latvia received a wonderful gift—historian Kaspars Strods published his book

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

Imprints of the Past: The Jewish Community of Varaklani. The book tells the story of the life of the Jewish community and their fate in a small town on the border of Latgale and Vidzeme. This work is the result of Strods's years of research, during which he reviewed a huge range of sources in several languages and wrote a truly comprehensive, poignant, and deeply thoughtful academic work.



The book talks about all facets of the Jewish history of Varaklani and looks at many aspects of community life, including less researched ones—material and intangible cultural heritage, relations with neighbors, the Holocaust and return, the period of Soviet occupation. Many thanks to the author for his research, which is an important contribution to Latvian Jewish history; hopefully it will inspire others to explore and capture the Jewish history of their region. The book is available in bookstores—it will certainly make a wonderful gift for everyone!

The well-known historian and Latgale expert, Iosif Rochko, has published another book (which will surely become rare someday) *Chronology of the Daugavpils Jewish Community 1940 - 2020*. This remarkable work of 170 pages contains more than a thousand dates and 50 photographs, reporting on various events and periods in the life of the Jewish community. As Rochko himself told reporters, the materials for the preparation of the *Chronology* came from his rich personal archive about famous compatriots, long-term protocols of the Maccabi sports club, which he led, articles and records from the media, and funds of the State Archives.

Chronology is dedicated to the memory of Zalman Yakub, born and raised in Daugavpils, who, having returned to his native city after the war, was the first to collect materials about the tragedy of the local Jewish community and had already in the 1980s published an article about it in the *Sovietish Heimland* magazine.

Chronology will surely be an important tool for everyone interested in the history of the region.



March 16, the birthday of the brilliant actor, director, and public figure Solomon Mikhoels (1890-1948) was celebrated

in his hometown with exhibitions, a film screening, and a solo poetry performance.



In the windows of the house where Mikhoels was born and spent his childhood, photographs were exhibited, and in the Latgale Central Library—books about the life and work of the famous native of Dina-burg (Daugavpils) were showcased.

In the library on March 16, the silent film *Jewish Happiness*, shot by Alexei Granovsky in 1925, was shown. The film is based on the stories of Sholom Aleichem. Mikhoels played one of the main roles in the film.

On the same day at 14:00, according to a long-standing tradition, flowers were laid at the bas-relief on Mikhoels's house, after which the hero of the day came out to the people. The image of Mikhoels was "tried on" by the actor Mikhail Abramov. At the entrance to the Mikhoels's house, he read the poems of Chaim Bialik, a poet whom Mikhoels loved very much. Viktor Janson, event director, supplied all this information to the local newspaper.

On March 16, a traditional procession in memory of the Latvian Legionnaires was held in Riga, with hundreds of people taking part, including Saeima deputies from the National Alliance. The event was held under significant police presence and ended with the laying of flowers at the Freedom Monument.



On March 16th, 2022 in Riga at the Freedom Monument

The procession started at about 11 o'clock from St. John's Church in Old Riga. A cordon of police officers and special forces soldiers was set up along the march route, but there were no incidents. This year the event was very quiet and calm.

Earlier, Minister of the Interior Maria Golubeva said that the Riga Municipality could not forbid laying flowers at the Freedom Monument. However, she noted that organizing a political demonstration in this case would not be very appropriate, as this would give the hostile Russian media additional grounds for accusations against Latvia, which they have leveled for several years.

The Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee usually also holds its events on this day. However, this year it decided it did not want to encourage provocations and aggravate conflicts, and thus did not appeal the ban of the Riga City Council on holding actions in Riga. Instead, the committee sent a group of its representatives to lay flowers at the monument to the victims of the Nazis in the Ventspils region.

Compiled by Ivar Brod
Translated by Mariya Taukule