



# The Latvian Jewish Courier

## YIZKOR 2021

On November 21, 2021, the Jewish Survivors of Latvia Society held its annual Yizkor at the Park East Synagogue in Manhattan, honoring the memory of more than 25,000 Latvian Jews slaughtered in Rumbula by the German Fascists and their Latvian collaborators (in total, 73,000 Jews were murdered in Latvia). This year we marked the 80th anniversary of this mass slaughter in Rumbula, where our sisters and brothers were killed. The meeting was led by JSL board member Mitchell Lieber. As always, the meeting began with the lighting of six candles in memory of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. Six children, second and third generations of JSL members' families, lit the candles:

- \* Aviva Solovey, granddaughter of Ivar Brod
- \* Bez Neihausen, grandson of Aelita Fitingof
- \* Michelle Minkin, granddaughter of Bronya Shif
- \* Eleonora Schwab, granddaughter of George Schwab
- \* Elan Kuperman, in honor of his grandfather Mark Kovenat
- \* Ben Shteynfel'd, close relative of the late Yefim Shteynfel'd

The seventh candle was lit in memory of our brothers and sisters who were killed in the struggle for Israeli independence and as a sign of our solidarity with the State of Israel. This candle was lit by Michelle and Brandon Silberman, grandchildren of David Silberman. After the candle lighting, our guest cantor, the world-renowned Joseph Malovany, sang the prayer "El Mole Rachamim."



*The meeting was opened and moderated by our board member Mitchell Lieber*

again... We, as survivors and as descendants of survivors, do all that we can and that is within our power to support, comfort, and assist our brethren—those still in Latvia, in the United States, and elsewhere."

Afterwards, Rafaella Neihausen read aloud a greeting from active JSL member Charles Springfield, son of former longtime JSL president Steven Springfield, who was unable to travel from Florida due to health reasons. He noted, among other things: "My father, Steven Springfield, always reminded our family of the importance of remembering the horrible history for our people during the war and the necessity to try to improve the situation for our brethren in Latvia... I try to always remember his words for the future of the organization. These past few years have been even more difficult, with the pandemic worsening the conditions in Latvia as well as challenging the ability to meet in person. Nonetheless, we must continue to support the charitable, educational, and political goals of the organization."

Mitchell Lieber then read out a greeting from our fraternal organization in Israel—the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel—sent by Chairman Elie Valk. This greeting begins with an emotional message: "We are with you at this sorrowful occasion when you have gathered to commemorate the 25,000 Jews, young and old, killed by Germans and Latvians in Rumbula, and tens of thousands more of our brothers and sisters killed in about seventy-two other towns and *shtetls* on Latvian soil." The end of this greeting was heartfelt as well: "Let us be united in our struggle for '*the Jewish kóved*'—for our legitimate rights to our spiritual and material heritage; let us be united in our aspiration to pass on the pride of belonging to this entity for future generations: 'Latvian Jews!'" *Dispersed, but united!*

Afterwards, guests listened to the yearly report of JSL President David Silberman and presentations by the oldest

*Continued on next page*



*Main Sanctuary of the Park East Synagogue during the service*

Afterwards, greetings sent to our organization were read aloud. Mitchell Lieber, the meeting leader, read aloud a greeting from JSL Vice President Joseph Faerber, who was unable to attend due to health complications. In his greeting, Joseph Faerber expressed the feelings of all members of our organization on this day: "We fulfill our collective and sacred promise to our murdered Jewish brethren in all of the cities and towns of Latvia, so that they will never be forgotten. We, the survivors, their children, grandchildren, and future generations, are all committed to keeping their memories alive, and we pledge to never forget them and to never allow what happened to them to ever occur

## YIZKOR 2021 (continued)

member of our organization, Professor George Schwab, as well as our guest speaker, H. E. Andrejs Pildegovičs, who is the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Latvia to the United Nations (these speeches are published as separate articles in the current *Courier*). Speeches were received with great interest.

An important part of our gathering commenced when Mitchell Lieber invited the audience to stand up as he read out the names of the Latvian Jews and members of our organization who passed away during the last year: **Jacob Basner, Garry Goldberg, Musya Ginsburg, David Dubrov, Vladimir Dubrovsky, Hirsh Kuklya, Sonia Levin, Igor Libman, Monus Maftsir, Yefim Shteynfeld, Leya Eidelman, and Raya Zlatokrilova.** This recognition of mourning was concluded with Cantor Joseph Malovany performing the Kaddish prayer.

At the end of the memorial service, guests watched a documentary film by Vladimir Molchanov, *Melodies of the Riga Ghetto*, which brought up very heavy emotions for those present.

\* \* \*

A special part of the meeting involved a recognition of Professor George Schwab in connection with his 90th birthday (on page 4, see our congratulations to the Hero of the Day).

By Eva Minkin



JSL President David Silberman speaks

## RIGA — NOVEMBER 30, 2021

One of the worst tragedies in Latvian history took place in Rumbula forest near Riga on November 30 and December 8 in 1941: German Nazis and their Latvian accomplices shot more than 25,000 Jews, killing them. Most of those killed were local residents; about 1,000 of them were Jews deported from Germany.

A commemorative event was held on Tuesday, November 30, 2021, in memory of this tragedy in Rumbula. The event was attended by notable representatives of the Latvian state, German Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas, as well as leaders of

the Jewish community of Latvia. The event was moderated by Dmitry Krupnikov, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia.

Historian Marger Vestermanis, who is the oldest member of the Jewish community and a former prisoner of the Riga ghetto and concentration camps, could not attend due to health reasons. D. Krupnikov read a speech on his behalf. The President of Latvia, Egils Levits, also gave a speech, an excerpt is included here: "It is a little-



Attendees of the event laid wreaths and flowers at the memorial

known fact nowadays that during the Second World War, the Latvian State adopted a special policy shortly before the outbreak of the war. While most European and global governments refused to let European Jews into their country, Latvia not only increased its immigration quotas but also took a significant population of Jewish refugees in. About thirty-six hundred Jews from Germany and other countries under its occupation found shelter and hope of survival in Latvia between 1938 and 1940, or the occupation of Latvia... We continue to mourn the Holocaust victims, including my family, and look back at the painful history of our state and nation, remaining starkly aware that the common future we are building together requires us to constantly bring back these memories stored in our collective consciousness. It is also a stark warning to those who believe otherwise and those who think we should forget what happened and start afresh. Nothing will ever be forgotten."

Speaker of the Saeima Inara Murniece spoke next. She stressed in her address that the memory of the Holocaust and its historical research are moral and political obligations. In her opinion, "in order to prevent a repetition of such events, it is necessary not only to know, but also to analyze the causes of these horrific

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## RIGA — NOVEMBER 30, 2021 (continued)

tragedies,” emphasized Murniece. “Eighty years ago we were not able to prevent the tragedy of the Riga ghetto.”

Latvian Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins also spoke: “Of course, the Nazis gave inhumane orders. But they would have remained unfulfilled if no willing executors of these orders had been found. Our government and society have done a lot in recent years, including memorial events like today’s, to awaken sympathy and compassion for the victims.”

German Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas began his speech by commemorating Frida Michelson, one of several survivors in Rumbula: “People are crying bitterly, bidding each other farewell... There is the constant sound of gunfire, while the guards are pressing people to hurry up... And all this goes on for many hours.” These words describe what Frida Michelson witnessed in Rumbula 80 years ago. Reading out her words here today, as a German Foreign Minister, while standing in a place that became a grave for thousands of people, fills me with sadness, horror, and shame.”

The Israeli Ambassador in Latvia Sharon Rappaport-Palgi, Latvian Minister for Defense Artis Pabriks, and the Mayor of Riga Martins Stakis also participated in the event. Toward the end, the rabbi of the Riga synagogue, Eliyokhu Krumer, read a prayer. Then the participants laid flowers at the memorial.

The evening of November 30 was marked by the “Trail of Candles” at The Freedom Monument in the center of Riga—a tradition since 2016. This initiative was started by Lolita Tomsone and historian Kaspar Zellis. Tomsone is the director of the Zhanis Lipke Memorial in Kipsala. She suggested this as a way to commemorate the Jews of the Riga ghetto killed in Rumbula, who, as she said, “once lived in the same city with our Latvian grandmothers and grandfathers, were a part of the Latvian people, and once fought for the independence of our country together.”

*By Eva Minkin, based on media materials*



*Trails of candles at the Freedom Monument, in memory of more than 25,000 Jews from the Riga ghetto killed in Rumbula*

## SURVIVAL AND CONTINUITY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE GEORGE SCHWAB’S ADDRESS AT THE MEMORIAL SERVICE



*George Schwab speaks*

How did I stumble on this topic? Years ago I came across a quote that continues to percolate in my mind. Queen Victoria asked her Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli how did he know that God exists? His answer: the survival of the Jewish people.

Despite hardships our people were forced to endure for centuries, culminating in the Holocaust, which robbed some 50% of an already minuscule worldwide Jewish population, yet

however small in number, we continue to survive as a people.

Whereas Disraeli ascribes our survival to God, I, with my usual Jewishchutzpah, would like to add a footnote. Our survival was also enhanced by the fact that we are The People of the Book. Studies of the scriptures in the course of centuries gradually led some to inquire what there is beyond purely religious texts. In due time, this led to an explosion of writings by People of the Book, some of which have made major contributions to civilization and culture. Think of the philosophers Maimonides, Spinoza, and the Latvian-born Isaiah Berlin; in the sciences, Einstein and Niels Bohr; in music, the composers Mendelssohn and George Gershwin; in literature, Saul Bellow and Boris Pasternak; in medicine, Sigmund Freud; in art, Chagall and the Latvian-born Mark Rothko; and in politics, Leon Trotsky. As we all know, I have only scratched the surface.

We, the People of the Book, also have a role to play in preserving the past and influencing the future. How? By building bridges between the past and the future by way of our children and grandchildren. They are the bridges. And the way to do so is by putting pen to paper, that is, by, at least, writing memoirs. Thank you.

## GEORGE SCHWAB'S 90TH BIRTHDAY



On November 25, our dear friend George Schwab, the patriarch of Latvian Jews in the United States, turned 90. He has lived a difficult, interesting, and eventful life. George was nine years of age on June 22, 1941, when WWII reached Latvia; German Nazis entered

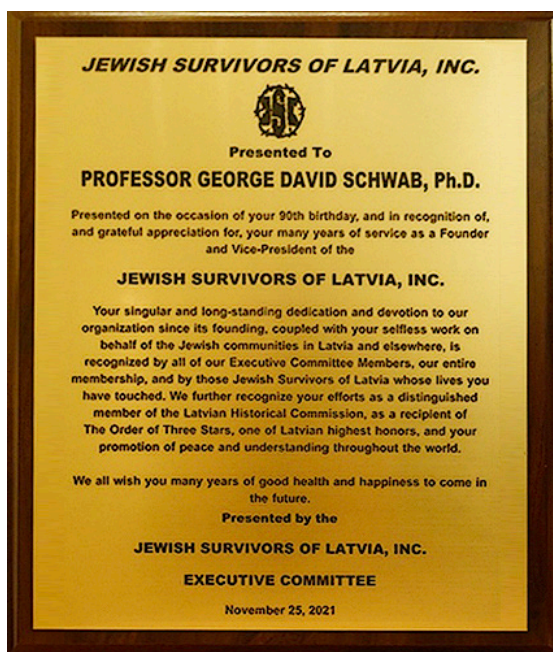
Libau and the terrifying days of the Holocaust began—Jews forced into ghettos, Jews transported to concentration camps, and the murder of his father and older brother. Liberation came on May 3, 1945, in Germany. He and his mother, also a Holocaust survivor, moved to the United States in February of 1947. He attended high school in Brooklyn, then went on to City College and Columbia University, where he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation in 1968. These were some of the stages of his life and career trajectory. His teaching career began at Columbia; he later moved to CUNY City College (his alma mater). He is now a professor emeritus there.



*Dr. Henry Kissinger, Professor George Schwab, and Professor Elie Wiesel*

A co-founder of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in 1974, Dr. Schwab served as its president from 1993 until he retired in January 2015. He was and is an author, editor, and translator of numerous books and articles, several of his writings have been translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Italian.

George Schwab was a co-founder and vice president of The Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the US and was the initiator and ideological leader of many, if not all, of the important events of our JSL organization. In the late 1990s, Professor Schwab became a member of the Latvian President's



*The plaque presented to George Schwab*

Commission of International Historians, whose mandate was to study Latvia's recent past: the two Soviet occupations and the Holocaust. He is a co-founder and chairman of the Jewish Heritage of Liepaja, his home town. His memoir, *Odyssey of a Child Survivor*, has been widely acknowledged as one of the best testimonials about the Holocaust.

Dr. Schwab was awarded the Order of the Three Stars of Latvia in 2002 for his achievements. He was also awarded The Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 1998, which recognizes outstanding contributions to the American nation. We congratulate our dear George on his 90th birthday and sincerely wish him good health and many more years of great achievements.



*Associates congratulate Professor George Schwab on his birthday*

## A REPORT BY DAVID SILBERMAN

Fellow Holocaust Survivors,  
Members of The Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the USA,  
Honored Guest Speaker Mr. Andrejs Pildegovics,  
Cantor Joseph Malovany,  
Honored Guests,

On behalf of the Board of The Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the USA, it is my privilege and honor to welcome you to our traditional annual gathering to commemorate the tragedy that befell the Jews in Latvia and the rest of Europe under Nazi occupation during 1941-45.

More than 80 years have passed since the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, including Latvia, which was then occupied by the Soviets, and the world encountered an heretofore unthinkable engine whose aim was the total annihilation of entire people, the Jewish nation. The Nazis called it: "The final solution of the Jewish question."

This horrible plan involved not only Nazi Germany and its allies but also the anti-Hitler coalition and local collaborators in most of the countries occupied by the Nazis, including Latvia.

After the capitulation of Nazi Germany in 1945, the world was left in horror; we, the survivors of the Holocaust, dreamed and believed that the world had learned a terrible lesson and such a tragedy would never be allowed again.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the U.S. Allied Forces, when he saw piles, mountains of corpses at liberated concentration camps and crematoriums, ordered the German general population to see what had been inflicted on other human beings and also ordered them to bury the victims. He foresaw that such evil could reappear and that some members of later generations might maintain that the Holocaust never took place.

Eisenhower left us a demanding charge: be vigilant and preserve the truth of the Holocaust history. Now, ironically, after eight decades, in our 21st century, we are widely encountering Holocaust deniers from the left and right—radicals displaying the traditional European anti-Semitism and newly aggressive Muslim anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism, national / racial hate are especially sharply developed in Western Europe, in France, Germany, and in the East—Romania, Poland, Lithuania.

Therefore, for us the survivors of the Holocaust and for our descendants, it is our obligation and duty to keep the Holocaust memory alive, to research the history, to study and to teach those around us.

Concerning Latvia and the Holocaust issue, we can with satisfaction state that much has been achieved since the reinstatement of the Latvia Republic in 1991.

Latvia is the only state in Eastern Europe that has established a special Holocaust Memorial Day, July 4, with annual mourning ceremonies at the Gogol Street Choral synagogue — burnt by the Nazis and their local collaborators. Participants include government officials, representatives of Latvia's Jewish Community Council, foreign ambassadors, and a wide public.

Commemorations are held in various places in Latvia at the executive sites.

A special tradition has been established of lighting memorial candles and placing flowers at the center of Riga at the Freedom Monument Square in memory of the Jews killed in Rumbula forest in November–December 1941.

Unfortunately, due to natural aging, our organization is gradually

shrinking. In the last year, we lost our good friend, member of the Board, and active editing staff Yefim Shteynfeld and Zichrono L'bracha.

As of today, we estimate we have approximately 200 members—of which approximately 150 are registered, with active or paid dues—approximately 100 members. Nevertheless, our organization is vibrant and is actively functioning. We conduct our annual Holocaust in Latvia memorial gatherings; the last memorial meeting, because of the corona virus restrictions, was held in the open air at the Brooklyn Holocaust Memorial Park. A special Holocaust Memorial stone has been installed in memory of the Jews murdered in Latvia.

Our Jewish Survivors of Latvia organization has actively participated in many events and issues concerning Jewish Community in Latvia and beyond in respect to the Holocaust in Latvia and its consequences. Such issues include: restitution for Jewish communal property lost in the Soviet and Nazi occupations; getting the continuous rent for the Riga Ghetto Museum managed by Shamir, and likewise. All our activities are described in detail in our newsletter, which in the past year has been issued 3 times.

Thanks to our friend Dr. Ivar Brod, the editor and his staff, our Courier has become a very informative source about present and past Jewish life in Latvia and Jews originating from Latvia, with special focus on their contributions in the struggle for Latvian independence in 1918, in establishing statehood for Israel in 1948, and contributions in science, technology, art, culture, etc., in Latvia, Israel, the United States, and other countries.

We deeply thank our friend Jack Neuhausen for joining us on the editorial staff, congratulations and welcome on board, dear Jack!

Concerning our publications, we are deeply satisfied with the issue of the remarkable and long-awaited memoir by our friend and one of the founders of our JSL organization, Professor George Schwab, *Odyssey of a Child Survivor: From Latvia through the Camps to the United States*. A very touching commentary was given in our last Courier by our Board member Aelita Fitingof. This book has been translated into Russian by Dr. Ivar Brod for a wide distribution in Russia, Belarus, and Russian-speaking areas. Congratulations dear George!

In addition, Aelita Fitingof, the well-known vocalist, multi-language singer, as the next speaker will report on her activities, brilliant performances, and impressive achievements. Our deep thanks to you, dear Aelita!

Another publication I would like to mention is of the book *Lipke's List* in English by the Museum of Zhanis Lipke in Riga, in which we actively participated. Presently the book being translated into Russian.

As in the past, we continue to promote and distribute Max Kaufmann's classic book, *Churban Lettland*, in English. Recently, under direction of Rabbi Menachem Barkahan, plans have been made to translate it into Hebrew.

We also promote and distribute Meyer Meller's monumental book, *Jewish Latvia: Sites to Remember*, Frida Michelson's *I Survived Rumbula*, and other books related to the Holocaust in Latvia.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all of you for participating in this Memorial Service in memory of the Jews killed in Latvia during the Holocaust and hope to see you at our future gatherings.

I wish you many years of good health, productive lives, and happiness in your families, have a pleasant Thanksgiving! Thank you.

## A SPEECH BY ANDREJS PILDEGOVIČS, REPRESENTATIVE OF LATVIA TO THE U.N., AT OUR YIZKOR ON 11.21.2021



*Ambassador A. Pildegovičs speaks*

Honorable President David Silberman,  
Honorable Prof. Schwab,  
Honorary Cantor Joseph Malovany,  
Dear Members of the Latvian Jewish community,  
Dear Friends, very good afternoon to you! Labdien!

As the 8th Latvian Ambassador to the UN, I am deeply honored, together with my daughter Lize, to attend this year's Yizkor—a commemorative service for the Jewish people who perished in Latvia during the Second World War. For decades, the Park East Synagogue has been a hospitable venue for the Committee members of the Holocaust survivors of Latvia to commemorate the victims of the Shoah and to reflect on the pressing challenges facing the Jewish community. Last year, due to COVID-19, several events were held in other formats. However, on January 27, 2021, together with Ivar Brod, we visited the Brooklyn Holocaust Memorial Park to pay tribute to the victims of the Holocaust in Latvia. We will never forget that between 1941 and 1945, more than 90,000 Jews—citizens of Latvia, Germany, and German-occupied countries—were murdered on Latvian soil by the Nazis and their Latvian collaborators. Today, we also pay tribute to the heroic legacy of 646 brave residents of Latvia who made 790 documented attempts to rescue Jews and succeeded in saving 576 precious lives.

In recent years, there has been an alarming increase in anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial worldwide. We have witnessed deplorable incidents of hatred, intolerance, discrimination, and violence against individuals based on their religion or beliefs. These heinous acts have also targeted public institutions, schools, graveyards, cultural centers, and places of worship. Many of them took place in the digital space or occurred during sporting events.

As a democratic state, Latvia strongly condemns any manifestations of racism, xenophobia, and hate speech and works to combat racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism. We have been working on awareness-raising campaigns in close cooperation with academia, civil society, and media organizations; we are working to have these

subjects included in school curricula.

It is imperative for governments around the world to promote tolerance and mutual respect in their societies. That should include educational initiatives, teacher training programs that expose and counteract the poisonous nature of anti-Semitism, as well as support for law enforcement in order to more effectively investigate anti-Semitic attacks, including online. At the same time, we have to be firm in upholding our values. Free access to information and freedom of the press should be respected. I recall vividly how limited, one-sided, and incomplete was the available information on the Holocaust during the Soviet period. That work only began upon the restoration of Latvia's independence. In 1990, the 4th of July was declared by the Latvian Supreme Soviet as the national commemorative day of the genocide against the Jewish people. It was the first such decree in the territory of the former Soviet Union. However, there is much more work to be done to open and digitally preserve the archives and libraries, to expose the sources of prejudice, bigotry, hatred, and the homophobic nature of extremist and totalitarian ideologies, to meaningfully address the legacy of all tragedies and controversies of WWII. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the efforts of this Committee on Holocaust remembrance, documentation, and research, in particular involving the youth. I was greatly inspired to take part in the 2019 March of the Living in Auschwitz death camp alongside thousands of young people from all corners of the world. Moreover, it is gratifying that over the last two years two broad screen films on the subject of the Holocaust—*The Mover (Tēvs nakts)* by Dāvis Sīmanis and *The Sign Painter (Pilsēta pie upes)* by Viesturs Kairiņš—have reached the wider public in Latvia and beyond.

Humanity must learn from the tragedies of the past. We must constantly remain vigilant, rejecting cynicism, fatigue, and indecisiveness. Dealing with the past and healing of present traumas are never easy, yet we should strive every day to eradicate the sources of evil, to end impunity, and to prevent the repetition of the crimes against humanity in the future. I am pleased to report that during this session, the Saeima (the Latvian Parliament) has been drafting a special law that is aimed at creation of the special fund for further support to the Jewish community in Latvia, including projects in social, educational, and cultural domains. It has passed the first reading and, hopefully, will be adopted in the first half of 2022.

This week of November is the time when Latvians of all ethnic backgrounds celebrate the Independence Day of Latvia. It is fitting to look back on the enormous sacrifices, multiple trials and tribulations, striving for revival and progress. I would like to stress the importance of the special transatlantic bond between Europe, the United States, and Israel. In this triangle, Latvia and Israel share a lot of common interests, concerns, and aspirations. One might call the Jews and Latvians the true miracles of survival, development, and innovation. Today in their respective regions, Latvia and Israel represent unprecedented examples of a vibrant, pluralistic society that enjoys free speech, free press, separation of powers, and a functioning parliamentary electoral

## A SPEECH BY ANDREJS PILDEGOVIČS (continued)

democracy. We know well that the creation of neither Latvia nor Israel was a gift or concession. In fact, our statehood has been earned with blood, sweat, and tears of successive generations of the Jewish people with a deep sense of belonging to the Holy Land regardless of their social background, religious and political views. I am pleased to note that Latvian Jews have contributed to the creation and consolidation of Israel, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel—Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook of Bauska, was just one of them. Today, we are discussing the prospect of the recognition of the dual citizenship between Israel and Latvia, as we had already done a few years ago between Latvia and the U.S.

Here, I represent a country—Latvia, which shares a lot of history, as well as ideals and values with the state of Israel. Like Israel, Latvia gained independence during the last century. It lost it during WWII and regained it 50 years later. Latvia lost one-third of its population in WWI and another one-third in WWII, experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust and multiple invasions from the East and the West. Our citizens—ethnic Latvians and Jews both perished in Stutthof, Gulags of Siberia, and the Riga Ghetto, they died in the battles of WWI and WWII, many fled into exile. Unlike Israel, following WWII, Latvia has not been a free country, not a member of the UN for more than 45 years against the will of its people. Therefore, we feel a strong solidarity with Israel on the issues of peace and security, on the struggle against distortion of history, on the fight against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and bigotry.

Having visited the death camp in Auschwitz, Yad-Vashem museum, Masada fortress, Biblical and pre-Biblical sites in Jerusalem, we ought to draw clear conclusions from the past and present to avoid repetition of such tragedies in the future.

The first lesson is very clear: we should never be neutral, passive, or silent when injustice is taking place, when international law is being disregarded. We must never take an indifferent stance on issues of peace and security in international affairs. We must be resolute in our international engagement to protect collective security. This is what we have been trying to do during the last 30 years, since admission to the UN on September 17, 1991. We nurture our independence; we protect our freedom, and develop very strong transatlantic relations with the United States, Israel, and the European Union. We strongly support the UN and multilateral system. It should not be forgotten that none of the UN member states have lost independence. We are pleased to collaborate with Israel in the OECD and the UN on the issues of cybersecurity, sustainable development, education, research, and energy conservation.

The second lesson: we will do our utmost to protect our citizens and our nation by investing in defense and resilience. The right of Israel to protect its citizens is unquestionable. It is a solemn responsibility of every state to protect its citizens. Our state was destroyed during WWII, so we could not protect our citizens. Now we say never again. We will do our utmost to protect our state, our democracy, and its citizens. For us, NATO remains the backbone of our security policy. At the end of November, Riga will host the NATO foreign ministerial meeting, and we look forward to the visit by the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. We attach great importance to close cooperation with our like-



*Professor G. Schwab and Ambassador A. Pildegovičs*

minded partners, including Israel, on the issues on peace and security.

The third conclusion: we have to be firm on our values, we should eliminate hidden subjects and taboos in our political discourse and our social life. Only truth can make us fully free. On this solemn occasion, I would like to express profound gratitude to Prof. George Schwab for his considerable contribution and engagement on the International Commission of Historians in Latvia, leading the way in addressing the least known events of Latvia's 20th century history. We owe you a great deal, among other things—the unanimous ratification by the U.S. Congress of Latvia's NATO accession under the leadership of then-U.S. Senator Joseph Biden. Please accept our best wishes on your 90th anniversary and warm congratulations on your new book, *Odyssey of a Child Survivor*. We know well that dealing with the past is tough, it is sensitive, controversial, but we strive to do as much as we can to expose all controversies of WWII. This work is of utmost importance given the developments in Russia and Belarus, where we witness massive state-sponsored campaigns aimed at distortion of history and white-washing of Stalinist crimes. The legal action by the Russian authorities against the Memorial Foundation that has been determinedly uncovering the truth of the crimes against humanity committed by the Soviet regime is just the most recent manifestation of this deplorable policy.

Lastly: as a Cold War baby and a practitioner of diplomacy over the last 25 years, I believe that historical windows of opportunity do exist. They should be used to their full potential to break the vicious circle of hatred, bloodshed, suffering, and pain. Therefore, as a Latvian diplomat, I pledge to continue my best efforts to promote peace, dialogue, and understanding for the benefit of all humanity.

In conclusion, let me stress once again how grateful and honored I feel for witnessing this commemorative day. I wish all those present peace, good health, prosperity, and continuous development.

Thank you! Paldies! Mazel Tov!

## RESTITUTION IN LATVIA

*“We must do everything possible to ensure that such crimes never happen again.”*

— Krisjanis Karins, Prime Minister of Latvia, from a speech given at a meeting on July 4, 2021.



On September 30, 2021, the Latvian Saeima accepted to the first reading a bill providing for the payment of 40 million euros to the Jewish community for property lost as a result of the Holocaust. Sixty-one deputies voted for the bill; 12 deputies voted against it. The bill stipulates that a specified amount will be paid from the state budget to the Jewish community of Latvia within 10 years. The funds should be allocated as compensation for part of the property that had belonged to the Jewish community before June 16, 1940—that is, before it was nationalized by the Soviet government and before the Jewish community was nearly completely destroyed during the Nazi occupation.

At a meeting of the budgetary and financial commission, Chairman of the Board of the Fund for Restitution of the Jewish Community of Latvia Dmitry Krupnikov said: “Two years ago, this bill was submitted to the Saeima, then criticism was expressed, which we tried to take into account when drafting this new law and annotations to it. This is the law of justice! About reimbursing the Jewish community for a part of the value of the property they lost. We very much hope that the issue will be resolved and an end will be put to this story.”

The payment of compensation at the meeting of the Saeima’s Commission was supported by Andris Teikmanis, Head of the Chancellery of the President of Latvia, as well as the Legal Bureau of the Saeima and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Only the deputies from the “National Association” spoke against it, in particular, the deputy Aleksandrs Kirshteins.

“In principle, this issue must be resolved in order to restore historical justice. During both occupations, all residents of Latvia suffered. Latvians and representatives of all other ethnic groups suffered enormously — both in the form of human losses and in the form of material damage. But only the Jewish community was deliberately destroyed, with more than 90% being killed. And this is how the losses of the Jewish community differ from the losses suffered by other groups in Latvia,” said Andris Teikmanis.

Before World War II, schools, orphanages, hospitals, and Jewish cultural centers belonged to Jewish communities and Jewish religious organizations, as well as to some members of the Jewish community whose families were completely destroyed during the Holocaust.

The property was built or acquired by Jewish religious organizations for their own use through donated funds. This property could not be returned to the legitimate heirs through denationalization since all members of these families had died as

a result of the Holocaust and the repression of the totalitarian communist regime.

We wish to emphasize that the Latvian state is not guilty and is not responsible for the nationalization of property carried out by the Soviet regime during the occupation of Latvia and is not guilty nor responsible for the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis.

Nevertheless, it will be ethical and fair if the state pays compensation to the Latvian Jewish community for real estate that became the property of Latvia after August 23, 1991.

If the reimbursement is confirmed by the final decision of the Saeima, the community has a clear plan for where to invest the money. It can only be spent in the territory of Latvia—with the exception of support for those people who survived the Holocaust in Latvia but live outside its borders, of which there are very few.

It is planned that the allocated funds from the Fund for Restitution of the Jewish Community of Latvia can only be used to finance such events and projects in Latvia that are related to religion, culture, education, science, health care, history, sports,



*The Saeima building in Riga*

charity, and restoration and preservation of the Latvian Jewish cultural and historical heritage. In 2016, within the framework of the same restitution, five buildings were returned to the community. For many years, they had stood empty. Now, part of the money will be spent on their restoration.

The purpose of the bill is to restore justice and provide support to the Jewish community. The annotation to the bill states that the goal is bona fide compensation for the cadastral value of property not returned in the course of restitution in order to eliminate the historical injustices of the tragedy and the consequences of the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis.

The decision of the Saeima following the results of the second and third readings is expected in early 2022.

*By Jack Neihausen*



## HOLOCAUST IN LATVIA: KEY POINTS

*[Continued from the previous Courier issue]*

During those discussions, the ghettos were established in all three cities. The largest of those was the ghetto in Riga. More than 29,000 Jews were settled on the territory of 12 square blocks, about 4 square meters of living space for each inhabitant. Restricting and degrading and discriminating rules and conditions, which typically included only one form of punishment: death.

The gates of the ghetto were closed on August 25. It seemed a safe place at that moment for a Jew. At least, it was the safest there was. But the ghettos lasted just a few months. It seems that Nazis reached the decision around October-November, it meant annihilation for most.

Friedrich Jeckeln, who had proved himself a great organizer after murdering more than 30,000 Jews at Babi Yar near Kyiv, arrived in Riga on November 16, 1941. In two weeks under his command, the execution place was prepared in Rumbula, 8 kilometers from the Riga ghetto. The day before the first action, the inhabitants of the ghetto were separated, about 4,000 men and 300 women were spared for further enslavement, and about 25,000 were sent to die in the pits of Rumbula. The murders were done during two days—November 30 and December 8.



*The Great Choral Synagogue burns in Riga on July 4, 1941*

The executions were carried out by Nazis from Germany, under the leadership of Jeckeln. Local collaborators dragged victims from the houses and to the pits in Rumbula. On the second day of massacres, it was done by the men of Arājs Commando. About 1,000 Jews were killed on the way to Rumbula by those groups of collaborators on two days. The Jews who remained in the ghetto were used to bury the bodies in the former Jewish cemetery around which the ghetto had been formed. In the next couple of months, the ghettos of Daugavpils and Liepāja were liquidated almost entirely. At the end of January 1942, when the Nazi leadership discussed near the Wansee lake future plans for their innovative “Jewish Question,” no more than 5,000 Latvian Jewish men and women out of 70,000 captured in Nazi-occupied Latvia were still alive.

So, according to the categorization I am presenting, the third period stretches from the beginning of 1942 to the end of the war and is concerned with the aforementioned few thousand enslaved but living Latvian Jews and the Jews from Western Europe—of whom some were consistently and systemati-

cally killed, mainly in the Bīķernieki forest, but also elsewhere. At the same time, this group was constantly subjected to what is known as “killing by work” or enslavement in the concentration camps. One of the last groups that arrived in Riga for extermination were about 500 Hungarian Jewish women who were brought to Latvia in the summer of 1944. At the end of the war, as the Red Army kept advancing, those Jews who had lived through the unimaginable times of World War II were forced to walk westwards in the harshest conditions; these were called “death marches.”

In total, about 90,000 Jews were victims of the Holocaust in Latvia. The number comprises of up to 68,000-70,000 Latvian Jews, about 20,000 Jews from Western Europe, and more than 1,000 Lithuanian Jews who perished in Nazi-occupied Latvia.

There were 1,182 survivors among those people. Recall that in the census of 1935, Jews accounted for 4.79% of the inhabitants of Latvia; the census of 2011 showed 6,437 Jews living in Latvia, only 0.3% of the population. Outside of Riga, Liepāja, and Daugavpils nowadays there are only a few other precincts in Latvia where a member of the Jewish community resides. That is the long-term outcome of the genocide during World War II.



*The execution of Jews in the Bīķernieki forest*

In the final part, it is necessary at least briefly to consider the existing publications and discussions about the Holocaust in Latvia. Thus, I am now turning to what I introduced as nodes at the beginning of my talk. First of all, there are two trends in presenting the Holocaust. Some researchers are guided by the official documentation, with some of them discrediting the memories and the others relying mostly on the memories of the witnesses and survivors. A striking example of the latter approach is the book by Max Kaufman, who summarized eyewitness accounts as early as 1947. Both of those approaches in their absolutes are highly problematic, especially because of the circumstances. The truth, and a virtue, as believed by Aristotle lies in finding the touching points, looking for consensus on these positions.

Another of the nodes is the issue of anti-Semitism in Latvia in the pre-war period. On one hand, there is a proposition that the Holocaust grew out of national anti-Semitism. On the other, there is a claim that the Holocaust had nothing to do with the interwar anti-Semitism in Latvia, which, at most, was mild, cultural, not racial, and rather unmanifested. As always, the reality is somewhere in between.

Again, on one hand, the democratic frame of a newly founded republic granted the Jews with a right of citizenship but also didn't delete the reality of the time that also includ-

## HOLOCAUST IN LATVIA: KEY POINTS (continued)

ed some anti-Semitic incidents, but nowhere near anything like pogroms or even single killings. This reality also included the anti-Semitic nationalistic movement Pērkoņkrusts, some openly anti-Semitic newspapers, and other features of cultural and household anti-Semitism. On the other hand, the regime of Ulmanis, who, indeed, destroyed the democracy in Latvia, ethnicized and nationalized the country, also outlawed the anti-Semitic Pērkoņkrusts and accepted Jewish refugees when most of the other countries, democracies included, closed their borders. But, again, if using the method of constructing the further development of events under the regime of Ulmanis, we see a clear strengthening of anti-Semitic policies and actions—a fact that is often overlooked in many countries.

But this again is the possibility that we didn't experience. What we actually did witness and endure was the year of Soviet occupation. And here we come to possibly the most important of the nodes in the understanding of the Holocaust in Latvia. Here I return to the introduction and the timeline where the Nazi invasion was preceded by a year of Soviet occupation that included the deportation to Siberia of 15,400 Latvian citizens one week prior to the Nazi attack on Soviet-controlled Latvia and only two weeks prior to the Nazi advancement through Riga and immediate arrests, repressions, and killings of Jewish residents. Rather sporadic acts at that moment, but fueled by the onslaught of anti-Jewish atrocity propaganda that did its best to link the crimes of the Soviet terror to Jews under the omnipresent slogan of "Jewish Communism."

This segment is extremely important when talking about the guilt attributed to Jews in the first year of Soviet rule. As it is a rather heated topic, we should do our best and strive for the facts. Clearly, there are things that need to be distinguished.



*Monument at the site of the execution of Jews from the Riga ghetto*

One is the understandable sympathy of some Jews to the Soviets and their rule, which promised wonders, equality for all and everyone, including Jews—who had faced discrimination for centuries. Also, it was a rather easy choice as at the moment the Soviet rule was one side of a coin, the alternative were the Nazis, with their racially anti-Semitic policies (although they had yet to turn into a full-scale genocide).

The reality was that after the year of Soviet occupation not



*A monument in the Bikernieki forest at the site of the execution of Jews brought in from various European countries*

the majority, but still relevant groups of Latvian Jews considered the Soviets to be a lesser evil as they had suffered under the Soviet no less than other groups. Nonetheless, the advancing Nazi regime blamed Latvian Jews for all the wrongdoings of the Soviet regime. This untruth was propagated with all possible means available: the crimes committed during the previous year of occupation were planned and carried out by the "Jewish Bolsheviks," "Jewish Communists," "Jewish KGBs," or "Red Jewish plague." It was a new notion in the worldview and propaganda of the Nazis, but here in Latvia, as elsewhere in the Nazi-occupied East, it met real history and real crimes, it came to be interpreted in racially anti-Jewish terms.

Nazi propaganda (and that's where anti-Semites from Perkoņkrusts collaborated rather more severely and notably than in the killings under the notorious Arājs Kommando, which, after the war, falsely, deliberately, and out of misinformation, was equated with the Arājs unit and its constitutive structures) did everything to associate all the crimes committed by the Soviet regime with Jews. And, at the time when Arājs, its men, and their deeds are under a heated debate in Latvia, the role of that intellectual collaboration and the metaphysical outcomes it has created is yet to be publicly and critically discussed. As should the ghosts they have created.

One last example is the use of the term "Year of Horror" in the media and language nowadays. It was a Nazi concept to propagate their interpretation of the year of Soviet occupation. That concept was a cornerstone of Nazi propaganda in Latvia and shamelessly associated crimes of the Soviet occupation with the imagined guilt of Latvian Jews. These false accusations were literally shouted in all imaginable forms of communication while the genocide, killings of every Jewish person, took place all over Nazi-occupied Latvia.

But back to the point. Latvian scholars and historians have answered the question of the collaboration of Latvian Jews with the Soviets. The work published by the academic experts in the field already more than a decade ago suggest that during the year of Soviet occupation the participation of Jews in the repressive institutions didn't exceed that of the general population and that the percentage of the Jewish representatives diminished with rank and the powers of the position. So, the idea

## HOLOCAUST IN LATVIA: KEY POINTS (continued)



*Memorial stone at the site of the execution of a group of Jews near the town of Valka. In total, the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities established memorials at about 60 execution sites.*

of Jewish bolshevism and its role in the Year of Horror is a lie spread by the Nazis—a lie with a significant resonance in some groups of Latvian society to this day.

Another perception of the Holocaust in Latvia is the topic of collaborationism. A strong symbol of this phenomenon is the Arājs Kommando, the self-defense team that was responsible for the destruction of about 25,000 civilians and participation in the destruction of up to 60,000 people. During the events I have described today, the most intense period of killings in Latvia came in the second half of 1941, when more than 60,000 Latvian Jews were killed. The Arājs Kommando had a role in a vast majority of those events and included about 500 assassins at the time.

Talking about the nodes, on the one hand, there is a position that nothing would have happened without Nazi occupation, e.g., Nazis occupied and ordered, and the locals had to

collaborate. On the other hand, another position, according to the memory of the victims, holds that Jews saw Latvians as oppressors and murderers, and, in many cases, they clearly were doing more than they were ordered to do. Let us recall, for example, the wild mockery of Jewish women and old people in the so-called Arājs headquarters, on Valdemāra 19, as described in numerous memoirs.

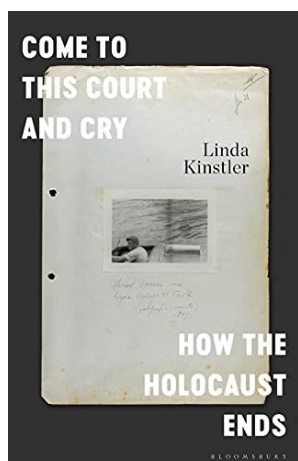
The misdeeds of Arājs and his men have been discussed lately, mostly thanks to two academic works on that matter, published last year. Attention in the materials may also be drawn to the characteristic argumentation of the position of the defense and the unacceptable discrediting of the testimonies of Jewish victims. A similar position has been taken by some historians.

Arājs did not deny that his team killed Jews, but did not see his responsibility because he was “merely following the orders.” The same argument was used by the acquittal and whitewashers of Herberts Cukurs, one of Arājs’s main associates. In the last decade, there has been a group of cultural texts that whitewash Cukurs and construct him as a hero. I can only inform you that I have not been able to find an argument to raise a possibility of acquitting Cukurs. The main arguments that were voiced by a prominent historian do not stand up to any serious criticism. Finally, to conclude my talk, I would like to state that, metaphorically, Latvia is at the crossroads of deciding whether to side with those like Cukurs or with the victims of the Holocaust—Latvian Jews. The previous decade ever-increasingly lets us think that the answer will be the victims, but it also showed that the battle won’t be easy and the result isn’t inevitable.

But before that also there is another central question for Latvian society to answer: was the Holocaust in Latvia an event that happened to THEM or to US? Or to quote the words of poet Knuts Skujenieks, engraved on a memorial stone for the victims of the Holocaust at the cemetery in Viesīte:

“Remember us with a moment of silence,  
But not for the sake of us, for the sake of yourselves . . .”

*By Dr. sc. comm. Didzis Berzins,  
Leading researcher of the Institute  
of Philosophy and Sociology at L.U.*



In the fall of 2021, British publishing house Bloomsbury announced the publication of the book by Linda Kinstler: *Come to This Court and Cry*, slated for release on May 26, 2022. The book’s author, Linda Kinstler, is a contributing writer at *The Economist*. Her coverage of European politics, history, and cultural affairs has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Wired*, and more.

Kinstler was advised not to go searching for her grandfather’s remains. A Latvian SS officer and KGB agent who disappeared after World War II, he seemed like the kind of ancestor you would rather forget. But then, one day in 2016, he turned up in the evidence files of an ongoing criminal investigation. The files indicated that he had worked alongside Herberts Cukurs, the “Butcher of Riga,” implicated in the murder of 30,000 Jews, and the only Nazi known to have been assassinated by Mossad.

In *Come to This Court and Cry*, Kinstler embarks on a journey across three continents, into the archives of seven nations, to uncover the fates of these two men—both members of an SS auxiliary unit in Nazi-occupied Latvia.

## IN MEMORIAM

### PROFESSOR ABRAM KLETSKIN



On August 23, Abram Kletskin (1933-2021), an outstanding member of the Jewish community of Latvia, journalist, film critic, and professor at the University of Latvia, passed away.

Abram Kletskin's life was full of vivid and memorable events. Starting his career at a large-circulation publication, later working as an executive secretary and head of a department in the

newspaper, *Padomju Jaunatne*, he was a favorite mentor and teacher for many well-known Latvian journalists. It is no coincidence that in 2007 the Latvian Saeima elected him a member, later appointing him chairman of the National Council for Radio and Television.

He was a well-known public figure, one of the organizers of the famous June 1988 plenary meeting of creative unions, which became a key event in the revival of modern Latvia. The scientific and creative work of Abram Kletskin was devoted to the art of cinema, journalism, and the processes of development of society and the media. He was a prolific author; his works included books *My World Meetings in Life in the Imagination* (1983) and *The Destiny of Cinema and Contemporary Culture* (2012), many scientific articles, as well as several documentaries, including the most popular, cult film of the late 1980s—*Is It Easy to Be Young?* In cinema, Kletskin was one of the influencers of the Riga school of poetic documentary cinema style in the 1970s. The highest award for filmmakers in Latvia, Big Kristaps, was presented to him in November 2018 for his lifelong contributions to the world of cinema.

From the very revival of the Jewish community of Latvia in the late 1980s, Abram Kletskin was an active and respected member of the movement, participating in many of its cultural and social endeavors. His passing is a great loss for our community.

### DISTINGUISHED YIDDISH TEACHER YAKOB BASNER



Yakob Basner (1927-2021), a Holocaust survivor and dedicated teacher seeking to preserve the Yiddish language and culture, passed away peacefully on Sept. 8, 2021, with his family at his side.

Yakob Basner was born on December 8, 1927, in Riga. He attended a Hebrew elementary school, later Yiddish high school. After the Nazi occupation,

Yakob and his family were forced into a ghetto where his mother and 7-year-old twin brother and sister were all murdered, along with 40 other members of his extended family. Having survived two years in the Riga Ghetto, Yakob spent the remainder of World War II being transported between five different concentration camps, including Kaiserwald, Stutthoff, Buchenwald, Leitmeritz, and Theresienstadt. On May 9, 1945, Yakob was liberated from Theresienstadt and he returned to his home in Riga. Several years later, he married Dora, whom he knew from early childhood. In the aftermath of WWII, he was forced to attend Russian and Latvian high schools, since there were no surviving Yiddish schools. So, he began taking linguistic classes in the evening. By 1964, his Yiddish had drastically improved, aided by Professor Abraham Barmazel, a famous Yiddish scholar and teacher of teachers.

The Basners immigrated to the United States in 1980 and found a new home in Long Beach, California. Although Yakob mastered English, Russian, Latvian, Hebrew, and German, Yiddish was closest to his heart. It was his mission to connect new generations of Jews to their past by teaching Yiddish language and literature at the Workmen's Circle; University of Judaism; California Institute for Jewish Culture and Languages; as well as many other teaching facilities worldwide. He received numerous accolades, including the Award of Merit from Long Beach City College and the Memorial Award from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). He was also an active member of the Claims Conference Advisory Board.

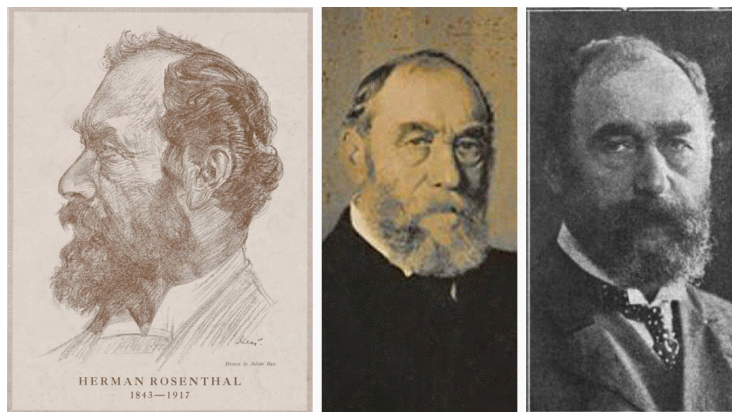
With the passing of Yakob Basner, we have lost not only one more former prisoner of the Riga Ghetto, but a prominent expert in Yiddish culture and beloved teacher for many of us.

# HERMAN ROSENTHAL: PHILOLOGIST, POET, EDITOR

*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.*

**Rosenthal, Herman** (1843-1917) — a philologist, poet, editor, librarian, and the head of the Slavic-Baltic Department of the New York Public Library—was born and raised in Fridrihshtadt (Jaunjelgava). He studied in Bauska and Jekabshtadt (Jekabpils). At the age of 16, he began translating many Russian poems, Nekrasov's in particular, into German and even composed his own verses. He took a course in botany and natural sciences for some time at Derpt (Tartu) University. After becoming independent, he began working in book publishing in Ukraine and also often wrote for the Jewish newspaper, *Hameliz*. In 1870, he published a collection of poems in German (*Gedichte*) and, in 1872, a comic called "Strange Treatment" (*Die wunderliche Kur*). As a member of the Red Cross Society in 1877-78, Rosenthal took part in the Russian-Turkish war and was awarded the Russian Red Cross medal for his outstanding service. After the war, he returned to Kiev where he was the publisher of the daily newspaper, *Zarya* (*Dawn*) and became a member of the St. Petersburg Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Russian Jews. In 1881, after escaping from the Jewish pogroms in Ukraine and Russia, Rosenthal was concerned about the condition of his oppressed co-religionists and led a group of 70 people to immigrate to the United States. Here, he organized agricultural communes for Russian Jews in

Louisiana and South Dakota. In 1885, he moved to New York where he began working in the book trade by writing editions in foreign languages. Between 1888 and 1890, he worked as the chief statistician at the Edison Electric Company and led the organization of an agricultural colony in New Jersey.



*Archival images of Herman Rosenthal*

He was then sent on a year-long trip by the Great Northern Railway Company to investigate the economic and trade conditions in Japan, Korea, and China to prepare for industrial expansion into these countries. In 1893, his findings from this trip were published and reported to the U.S. government. After that, he held several government positions, including head of the Ellis Island reception service (the primary arrival destination for immigrants to the U.S. at the time). In 1897, he was appointed vice president of the Federation of American Zionists of New York. In the late 1890s, Rosenthal was recommended by Jacob Schiff, a major industrialist and philanthropist, to join John Billing, the director of the New York Public Library. In 1899, Rosenthal organized and was head of the Russian Department (later the Slavic-Baltic Department) of this world-famous library for many years up until his death. Only a year after its creation, the department's collection contained two thousand volumes. By 1908, the department had eight thousand books and subscriptions to 89 newspapers and magazines.

Herman Rosenthal constantly published his work in New York newspapers in both German (*New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herald*) and English (*The Outlook* and others). He was also prominently involved with Hebrew literature and the development of the Haskalah movement in Russia. In 1894, Rosenthal founded the society *Ohole Shem*, serving as president. In 1900, he became a member of the editorial Board of the Jewish Encyclopedia and the co-editor of the monthly Hebrew journal, *Ha-modia le-hodashim* (*The Monthly Observer*), a periodical mainly devoted to the American Jewry. He translated poetry and prose from 14 different languages, including Russian, Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, Latvian, French, Italian, German, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He published these translations in German (poems "Ecclesiastes" and the "Song of Songs") and in English (H. Ganza's "The Country of Riddles"). His poems and translations into German are recognized as significant poetic achievements. When a library school existed at NYPL, Rosenthal taught a course on Russian Literature.

**By Ivar Brod, translated by Alan Solovey**

A LIST OF RUSSIAN, OTHER SLAVONIC  
AND BALTIC PERIODICALS IN THE  
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

COMPILED BY  
HERMAN ROSENTHAL  
CHIEF OF THE SLAVONIC DIVISION

NEW YORK,  
PUBLIC LIBRARY,  
1916

*One of Rosenthal's research works, published as a book*

## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE



The chairman of the Association presenting his closing remarks

The Association of Latvian & Estonian Jews in Israel held its Memorial Gathering on December 8—exactly 80 years after the second Aktzia in Rumbula. Despite the travel and gathering limitations imposed due to the pandemic, some 190 people (slightly fewer than usual) came to the Hall in Tel Aviv's suburb Giv'ataim; among them were children and grandchildren of Association members—second- and third-generation offspring of the victims.

Here are few sentences from the speech of Elie Valk, the Association chairman: "We gathered here on the exact 80th anniversary of the second Aktzia in the Rumbula forest near Riga, which involved the murder of more than 25,000 Riga ghetto prisoners. In the preceding five months of 1941, entire Jewish communities across Latvia and Estonia were wiped out—murdered. I will not repeat all the numbers; I will only mention that out of about 74,000 Jews of Latvia and Estonia who perished in the Holocaust, there were 16,000 children, the same Jewish children about which Bialik wrote in a song: "Unter di griniņke beimaleh špiln zih Meišaleh Šleimaleh." ("Under the green trees, Meisheleh, Shleimaleh are playing.").

These murdered—adults and children—left us a will to know and remember! We remember and we will do everything to assure that generations to come will remember as well..."

The Jews in Latvia Museum published *I Would Like to Become Someone...*, a book that contains the diaries of three Jewish girls who lived in different places in Latvia and were united by an equally tragic fate—their deaths in the Holocaust in 1941.

Annie Khatskelson was born in 1923, lived in Riga, wrote her diary in German. Hanna Bloch was born in 1922, lived in Strenci and Valmiera, wrote her diary in Latvian. Sheina Gram was born in 1926, lived in Preili and wrote a diary in Yiddish.

The girls' diaries reveal not only the observations and thoughts of their authors, but also reflect on the events and sentiments of that time. The title of the book, *I Would Like to Become Someone...*, is a fragment from the diary entry of Annie Khatskelson, who continued this phrase with the words: "The most important thing is that I would like not to be forgotten after death".

The publication of the diaries,



Translation of the book *I Would Like to Become Someone...*

as it were, fulfills this will and gives us the opportunity to look at the world and the history of Latvia through their eyes.

The publication of these diaries was made possible with the financial support of the Remembrance, Responsibility and Future Fund (Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft EVZ) and is part of a joint project of the Jews in Latvia Museum, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia and the Zhanis Lipke Memorial.

Last November marked 30 years since the opening of the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Mezchciems, near Daugavpils, which was the first such memorial in the Baltic States.



At the remains of Jews killed in Pogulyanka before their reburial

This project began when human bones and decayed remnants of children's shoes were found in the Poguliansky forest. As the then head of the Jewish community of Daugavpils said, excavations were immediately carried out at the site, and the remains of prisoners of the Daugavpils ghetto, who were shot in 1941-42, were discovered. Many of the memorabilia found in this process were later donated to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. And on July 9, 1989, the reburial of the remains of the victims took place.



Memorial stone at the burial place of the victims of the Holocaust from the Daugavpils ghetto

On November 10, 1991, a memorial with symbolic plaques was opened in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, both here and in 18 other European countries. A special tablet informs about the number of prisoners killed in the Daugavpils ghetto, 15,000 in all. Just about 100 survived. The main stone of the memorial, which weighs about 20 tons, depicts the Star of David along with the inscription "In memory of the children of Israel" in Yiddish. The author of the project was the artist Oleg Marinokha. At the memorial in Mezchciems, every year, on July 4, the day of remembrance of the victims of the genocide of the Jewish people, events are held dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust.

Within the framework of the Society Integration Fund operating in Latvia, which leads the Interaction between Latvian Youth and National Minorities project, the Goral Society has, for two years, been implementing the Jews of Jelgava: History and Traditions program with the purpose of introduc-

## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)



*Ilana Lisagor, initiator of the program for introducing the youth of Jelgava to the Jewish history of the city*

ing students in Latvian and Russian schools to Jewish culture. The work on this program began in 2006; a few years later a collection of Jewish fairy tales, previously unknown in Latvia, was published featuring illustrations by Goral society board member, Ilana Lisagor. She believes that to reduce discrimination and the impact of negative stereotypes, work must begin from early childhood, as it is the young who are most open to experiencing different cultures. In June of this year, a seminar was held for schoolteachers via Zoom; and in August, an artistic event led by Ilana Lisagor was held in Jelgava: pupils in grades 5-12 from four local schools became acquainted with the Jewish fairy tales and folklore; then, under the guidance of the teacher at School 5, Natalia Novikova, made sketches and drawings in their albums. Then, dividing into small groups (50%/50% by ethnicity), students examined and photographed Jelgava and its architecture and details, later comparing them with the heroes and objects from the Jewish fairy tales.



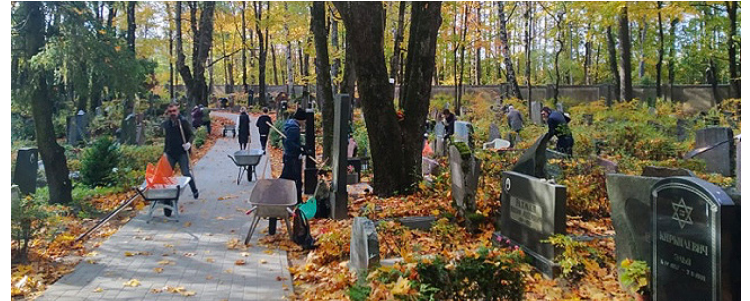
*Travelers on the trip to the Jewish places of Jelgava*

In September, the experienced Jelgava historian and archaeologist Andris Tomashun introduced the schoolchildren to the Jewish history of the city, giving an extensive lecture and also conducting an educational excursion, during which the students immersed themselves in the urban environment, examining notable objects related to the Jewish residents of Jelgava. They then discussed what they saw with their teachers.

The results of this work, together with the illustrative materials created during its course, were presented at the final event, an exhibition held in conjunction with the performance of the Klezmer ensemble that performed traditional Jewish music.

On the first Sunday of the second month of autumn, on October 3, the Riga Jewish Community, with the support of the Uniting History charitable foundation, organized a clean-up

event at the New Jewish Cemetery of Shmerli. Regular maintenance of the cemetery is important to those of us living today and for preserving the memory of the history of Latvian Jews. The cemetery keeps the memory of events, both private and well-known and preserves the names of representatives of different generations. One of the community's aims is not to forget them, to treat the cemetery with respect, and keep it clean. Before the start of the work, the director of the Jews in Latvia Museum, Ilya Lensky, spoke about the history of the cemetery, which has existed for almost a hundred years. The development of the cemetery began in the 1920s and was finally completed after 1930.



*Cleanup of the Shmerli cemetery*

Designed by renowned architect Paul Mandelshtam, the New Jewish Cemetery includes both individual graves and public memorials. In August, with the help of the Uniting History Foundation, a modern and convenient information stand was installed at the entrance to the Shmerli cemetery; it offers a detailed plan of the burial plots and has markers for the notable places of the cemetery, including a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, a memorial in honor of the Righteous Among the Nations, Zhanis and Johanna Lipke, and a memorial to the Jewish soldiers who were killed in the struggle for the independence of Latvia. Many famous figures of science, arts, culture, and education are buried in Shmerli, including world chess champion Mikhail Tal, composer Oskar Strok, writer and playwright Mark Razumny, artist Mikhail lo, and many others.



*Sign at the entrance to the Shmerli cemetery indicating the location of the graves*

More than 20 volunteers responded to the invitation of the Riga Jewish Community to take part in the clean-up day. They helped clean abandoned graves, remove leaves and branches, and clear paths to burials and memorials. Among the tidied-up monuments were the grave of the famous folklorist and teacher Girsh Etkin, the burial place of the Eglaine Jews who were shot in 1941, as well as the monument to Jewish soldiers who died in the struggle for independence.

At the end of September, news outlets in Israel reported that a square on the outskirts of the city of Sderot, by the decision of

## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

the municipality, will be named after Karlis Ulmanis. Ulmanis was the head of the Council of Ministers of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s, and, from 1934, after a coup d'état, the authoritarian president of Latvia. The plan is to erect a monument dedicated to the statesman in the square as well. The man behind this project is the founder and director of the Riga Ghetto and the Holocaust in Latvia Museum, Menachem Barkahan, who splits his time between Latvia and Israel. Barkahan proposed paying tribute to Ulmanis's role in the 1930s in saving Jews from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia from sharing in the tragic fate of their fellow Jews. While the assessment of Ulmanis's political activities is complex, primarily in relation to Latvia's ethnic minorities, including Jews, it should be noted that, indeed, on his direct orders, entry visas were issued to Jews who fled from the ever-increasing and unprecedented persecution of the Jewish population in those countries.



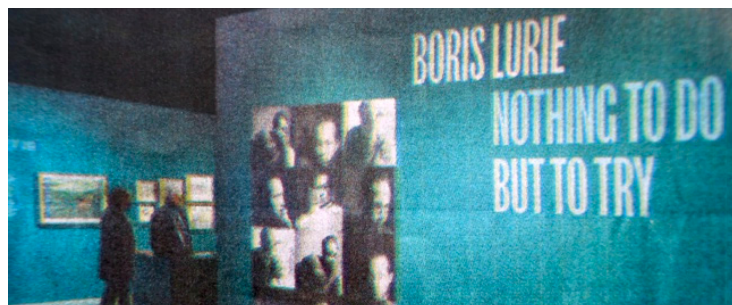
*The square in Sderot to be named after Karlis Ulmanis*

Latvia turned out to be one of the very few states where these decisions were made and carried out, saving the lives of many. At the same time, however, it should be noted that only very wealthy refugees-migrants could afford this, and, most important, that the overwhelming majority of them considered Latvia to be an intermediate stop on the way to other countries, mainly America.

In our August issue, the *Courier* reported on an exhibition in Riga at the Zhanis Lipke Memorial, of paintings by a former prisoner of the Riga ghetto, artist Boris Lurie (1924-2008). At the end of October, a large exhibition of Boris Lurie's works also opened in New York, in the Museum of Jewish Heritage in lower Manhattan.

Boris Lurie grew up in Riga in the 1930s. He was 16 years old when the Nazi occupation began and he and his family were forcibly evacuated to the ghetto. Later his mother, grandmother, sister, and girlfriend were killed in the massacre at Rumbula. Boris and his father survived several labor and concentration camps throughout Latvia, Poland, and Germany and were liberated from Buchenwald-Magdeburg. Just after the war Lurie created his "War Series", following his service with the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps and subsequent immigration to New York.

This exhibition opened in collaboration with the Boris Lurie Art Foundation, based in Clifton, New Jersey.



*Boris Lurie's exhibit at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in NY*

The exhibition on Lurie's life and creative work is slated to run through April 29, 2022.

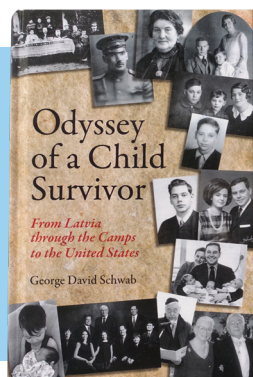
In October, the Ita Kozakevich Association of National Cultural Societies of Latvia (ANCSL) hosted an exhibition of works by the Latvian artist Joseph Elgurt (1924-2007). Elgurt is an outstanding Latvian graphic artist, born in Kishinev, and a Holocaust survivor. His entire family died in the ghetto; after his release from the ghetto in 1944, Joseph was drafted into the Soviet army and was awarded the Order of Glory. From 1952, he lived in Riga and actively painted its wooden architecture (in particular, Grizinkalns, where he lived), workers, ordinary people.



*One of artist J. Elgurt's paintings at the exhibition*

He died in 2007 at the age of 83. His works have been shown in many countries—Russia, Israel, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Germany, France, Switzerland, United States. The current exhibition includes works from the 1960s to 2000. The main theme in the artist's work was the people and environment around them—the interiors of rooms, courtyards, parks, the old city. The quiet beauty of your surroundings are the sensations and images that you most pay attention to when you are presented with the works of Elgurt. This exhibition is a prelude to the jubilee exhibition project, slated for 2024, when the artist's centenary will be celebrated. **Compiled by Ivar Brod**

**Translated by Mariya Taukule**



The English edition of Professor George Schwab's memoir, ***Odyssey of a Child Survivor***, can be purchased online on Amazon. To purchase a Russian translation of this book within the United States, please send a check for \$20.00 (handling and postage included) to the address shown on the second page of this issue of the *Courier*.