



The Latvian Jewish Courier

YIZKOR 2022

On November 20, 2022, the Jewish Survivors of Latvia held its annual Yizkor at the Park East Synagogue, honoring the memory of more than 75,000 Latvian Jews brutally slaughtered by German Nazis and their Latvian collaborators. After the war, the founders of the JSL (however, our society has been established legally since 1984) began these annual gatherings to commemorate those who were murdered. This year marked the 81st anniversary of the mass slaughter in Rumbula, where our loved ones, our sisters and brothers, were killed. We began our meeting with the lighting of six commemorative candles in memory of the six million Jews killed during the years of the Holocaust. Eleven children (third-generation JSL members) lit the candles:



The meeting was opened and moderated by experienced JSL member Mitchell Lieber

- * **Ilana Miranda and Jacqueline & Joshua Rozov**—grandchildren of David Silberman
- * **Eleanora, Michael, and Noah Schwab**—grandchildren of George Schwab
- * **Eva Phillips and Aviva Solovey**—granddaughters of Ivar Brod
- * **Bez Neihausen**—grandson of Aelita Fitingof
- * **Joshua Rakhman**—grandson of our beloved Luba Rakhman
- * **Anna Rishik**—granddaughter of our beloved Gerta Feigin

who spoke about the long-term efforts of the Council of the Jewish Communities of Latvia to promote and successfully pass the law “On Goodwill Reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia” by the Latvian Saeima. Lensky’s speech, “Road We Walked,” described in detail the many difficulties on the road to passing this bill. In 2002, the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities was formed. In 2006, the bill was developed, supplemented by a list of 275 properties that were in possession of the state or municipalities and had yet to be restituted or reimbursed. The bill then became a “hot potato” of Latvian politics, with several governments promising to pass it, but failing to get the Saeima’s approval. Opponents offered different arguments against restitution:



The third and fourth generations—grandchildren and great-grandchildren of JSL members lit the commemorative candles —after Bronya Shif (first from left) opened the ceremony

- The property was expropriated by the Soviets, so Latvia cannot be held responsible
- Reimbursement would mean taking on the guilt for the Holocaust
- The Jewish community is not the same Jews, but Soviet immigrants, and therefore have no rights to the property of Latvian Jews
- If the property is to be reimbursed, it will be used by community leaders for shady financial operations
- and others

To express our solidarity with the State of Israel and to commemorate our brothers and sisters who sacrificed and who continue to sacrifice their lives in defense of the State of Israel, and to all of the victims of terror, an additional seventh candle was lit by **Lawrence Kruglyak**, a member of the Friends of Israel Defense Forces and grandson of Semyon Gizunterman.

In 2016, five objects were returned, and the Jewish Community Fund was created to manage them. Nevertheless, we insisted that the issue should be addressed as a whole, rather than in small portions. In 2019, the liberal “Attistibai/Par” Party decided to back the bill in the Parliament, but failed to gain the majority.

After the candle lighting, our guest cantor, the world-renowned Joseph Malovany, sang the prayer “El Moleh Rachamim.” Afterwards, meeting attendees listened to the yearly report of JSL President David Silberman (the text of this report is presented on pages 3 and 4 of this *Courier*).

Finally, on February 10, 2022, the bill was passed, gaining support from both coalition and opposition parties across the political spectrum. The bill’s wording was specially crafted to address some of the concerns. For example, not using the word *compensation* (as it implies guilt), but rather *reimbursement*. The bill once and for all settles any possible issues with Jewish property claims in Latvia. The case is resolved, the page has been turned and will never be opened again.

Later, JSL Vice President Professor Schwab introduced our Guest Speaker Ilya Lensky, the Jews in Latvia Museum director,

Continued on next page

YIZKOR 2022 (continued)

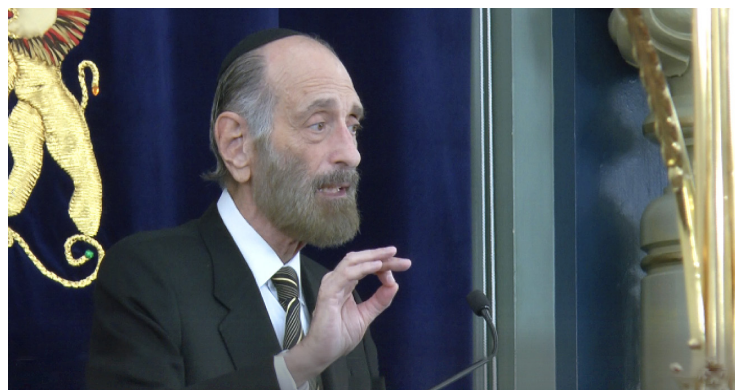
Starting from 2023, 40 million EUR will be allocated to the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund in ten yearly installments. The Fund may allocate the money for the needs of culture, education, and charity. The money must be spent in Latvia, except for support to Latvian Holocaust survivors residing abroad. The grants will be submitted on a two-level model. Initial selection will be made by the board of the Fund, comprising six appointed members of Latvian Jewish Community, five representatives of international partners, and a non-voting supervisor from the ministry of finances.

Specific instructions on the procedure for submitting applications and allocating funds are expected to be approved in February of 2023.

Ilya Lensky's speech was followed by a greeting from one of our guests—Andrejs Pildegovics, Latvian Ambassador to the UN—which was very warmly received (the text of this greeting is included on page 5 of this issue of the *Courier*).



Ilya Lensky, director of the Jews in Latvia Museum, speaks



Cantor Joseph Malovany not only performed prayers and sang songs in Yiddish, but also spoke emotionally about the war in Ukraine

The participants were then also welcomed by Charles Springfield, son of Steven Springfield, the founder and long-term president of the JSL. Charles briefly recalled the difficult early years of our organization.

Afterwards, Chairwoman of the Board Aelita Fitingof delivered an emotional and meaningful speech. As a professional singer, Aelita performs extensively for various bands in the U.S. and abroad. She shared impressions from her performances and, among other things, stated: "No matter where in the world or what language I am singing in, I always include a song in Yiddish to tell my story, whether it's in Japan or South Korea, Argentina or Israel,

Canada or Latvia. Charity work is a way of life for me, where I lend my voice and talent to worthy causes like the Miami Organ Transplant Institute (I've participated in five concerts for them over the last two years) and four live concerts for the Veterans Club in New Jersey, raising funds to aid critically injured soldiers through the Tunnel to Towers program, providing mortgage-free homes and aiding veterans in need... I warmed their hearts and put a smile on their faces with 'Songs from the Heart,' taking audiences on a journey with my family that spans three continents." Aelita noted her feelings after reading the recently published memoirs of our dear George Schwab: "This book must be read by everyone who holds dear the memory of departed loved ones, on whose shoulders we stand today."

Afterwards, our host Mitchell Lieber presented a 9-minute compilation of work-in-progress excerpts from his documentary, *Rumbula's Echo*, to the audience and shared that work on the film would soon be completed. After that, Mitchell invited everyone to stand and read aloud the names of Latvian Jewish members of our organization and their loved ones who have died in the past year: **Bella Ginsburg, Slava Levin, Leo Gitlin, Mark Peysakhovich, Sara Sorkin (née Averbukh), Bella Kit, Saul Hagid, Irma & Sarah Malkin**. This recognition of mourning was concluded with Cantor Joseph Malovany performing the Kaddish prayer.

Joseph Malovany also delivered a speech: "Thirteen months ago I was in Kiev as a guest of President Zelensky to participate in the 80th anniversary of this horrible thing that happened there in Babi Yar. People know what happened in Babi Yar. It was on Yom Kippur of 1941. Within 1.5 days they killed 47,000 Jews. I could say that I became friends with President Zelensky. However, I didn't know at the time that in fourteen months, the Ambassador of Latvia Mr. Pildegovics would speak so outstandingly as he did today. Specifically about what is happening in Ukraine. I agree with the ambassador 125%. I think that his speech today, if it was recorded, should be published in all newspapers. It is a classic, it's factually correct, it's honest, it's true, it's emotional, and it is outstanding what this human being has to say today in regards to this horrible, horrible war in Ukraine. People should read this speech, people should study it, and people should express themselves with the same statements and the same feelings. Thank you very much, Mister Ambassador." In conclusion, Cantor Malovany sang several songs in Yiddish, among them the beloved "*Zog nit keinmol az du geist dem letzten weg*" and "*Moishele, main fraint*."

By Eva Phillips

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RUMBULA — NOVEMBER 30, 2022

A memorial event took place in Rumbula on November 30 at noon; it commemorated the 81st year since the mass murders of Jews here—one of the largest sites of a mass extermination of Jews in Europe, where around 25,000 of the Riga ghetto prisoners were murdered during two slaughters.

The ceremony was organized by the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities. The event was attended by state officials, including Edvards Smiltēns, Speaker of the Saeima, and Deputy Prime Minister; Artis Pabriks, Minister for Defense, representatives of the Riga City Council, representatives of the Israeli embassy, diplomatic corps of other countries, as well as public organizations. The event was also attended by Arkādy Suharenko, the chairman of the Latvian Jewish community, and community representatives, Rabbi Elijohu Krumers of the Riga Synagogue, as well as students and teachers of the Š. Dubnovs Riga Jewish Secondary School.

David Lipkin, member of the Board of the Riga Jewish Community, led the ceremony and delivered a speech. Rabbi of the Riga Synagogue Elijohu Krumer performed a prayer service. "The Holocaust is a tragedy for Latvia and many European countries, it is a tragedy for all mankind. Latvia has always firmly



The meeting in Rumbula

and consistently condemned the crimes against humanity committed by the occupying authorities and their accomplices," said Edward Smiltens, Speaker of the Saeima, in his speech. "The memory of the victims of the Holocaust will always exist in Latvia. We honor the memory of those who, in the darkest times, managed to preserve their humanity and selflessly save innocent people from inevitable death."

RIGA — NOVEMBER 30, 2022



Trails of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga

For the seventh year now, people have brought candles to the Freedom Monument in Riga in memory of the victims of the mass executions of Jews who were imprisoned in the Riga ghetto and brought to Latvia from Germany, Austria and other countries occupied by the Nazis. This action, organized by the Latvian Council of

Jewish Communities and the Zhanis Lipke Memorial, took place from 6-10pm. Volunteers were on duty at the monument, making sure that the candles on the light paths did not go out. "We are once again celebrating the black anniversary of Rumbula, where the lives of 25,000 Jews were brutally cut short," said Lolita Tomšone, director of the Zhanis Lipke Memorial. "They were our people, our neighbors. . . On the evening of November 30th, we call to commemorate the lost lives and to light the candles. By doing this, we will be reminded of the lost souls and help create a Latvia together where such tragedies are unthinkable in it."

People came all evening, lit candles, stayed to commemorate and to tell their story. Margers Westermanis, the founder of the Jews in Latvia Museum, a historian, and former inmate of Riga ghetto, was present to light a memorial candle in Latvia's holiest place, as he does every year. His family members were among those murdered. Let us never forget.

By Eva Phillips

A REPORT BY DAVID SILBERMAN (ABRIDGED)

Fellow Holocaust Survivors,
Members of The Jewish Survivors of Latvia in the USA,
Honored Guest Speaker Ilya Lensky,
Ambassador 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 of Latvia and Europe under Nazi occupation.

This year is the 83rd anniversary of the start of WWII in 1939 and the 77th anniversary of its end in 1945.

Today it is especially important to understand and comprehend the tragic lesson of history. In the 1930s, democratic European nations and America could not

stop two predators greedy for world dominance—Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. They initially were allies and, in 1939, divided Europe between them in the secret, criminal addition to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

Today, I would like to bring to your attention the work performed during the past year, I will also touch on the totality of our activities since establishing our organization decades ago. Additionally, I will discuss our plans and tasks going forward.

The Jewish Survivors of Latvia USA was established when Max Kaufman published the fundamental work about the Holocaust in Latvia, the 1947 book *Churbn Lettland (The Destruction of Jews in Latvia)* in Munich, Germany. After that, Max Kaufman and a group of Jewish intellectuals, Holocaust survivors, and the talented organizer Steven Springfield started

A REPORT BY DAVID SILBERMAN (continued)

our organization in the USA.

The main task, as defined then, was to preserve the memory of the Holocaust in Latvia. This continues to be our purpose today. Each year, at the end of November or beginning of December, we conduct a memorial service in memory of the Jews killed in Latvia. This commemorates the two horrible mass murder actions that began in the Riga ghetto on November 30 and December 8, 1941. It also coincides with the Skede massacre in Liepaja that began one week later.

Jewish Survivors of Latvia USA published volumes of remembrances by Holocaust survivors and later began publishing our newsletter, the Courier. Also, under the leadership of Steven Springfield, we provided social, material, and financial assistance to needy Holocaust survivors in Latvia.



David Silberman speaks

This manifested in this summer's book by Linda Kinstler, *Come to this Court and Cry: How the Holocaust Ends*. We are grateful to the author for bringing to light little-known episodes of the Holocaust and for her deep investigation into extensive Holocaust documents, including editions of our Courier and the book *The Right to Live* by Ella Medalje.

Though the mass massacres of the Holocaust ended 77 years ago, we are still dealing with its consequences—in our eternal memory, in courts, in historical research, conferences, public discussions, films, books, and many other forums.

We live in a constantly changing world and must adjust to current realities. We can't reverse and change the past, but we also cannot accept the unconditional hate and vengeance of some Holocaust survivors toward people and countries that collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust machine. Today, we are encountering the 3rd and even the 4th generation. It is their grandfathers and great-grandfathers who participated in killing Jews as members of groups such as the Arajs Kommando and local police.

We must extend our hands to those who come to us with remorse, expiation, and atonement. Germany's Chancellor Konrad Adenauer did this and built a bridge when he proposed to Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that Germany compensate survivors for Nazi crimes. Afterward, Holocaust survivors and the Jewish State of Israel started receiving funds that, to a large degree, helped Israel to withstand attacks and wars that sought to end its existence. Also, in the post-war period, Germany

actively engaged in de-Nazification and re-evaluation of its history and added programs to its schools to teach the evils of the Nazi period.

Based on all these issues, the current goals of our organization are:

1. Bring perpetrators of the Holocaust to justice, even posthumously, as in the case of Herbert Cukurs.
2. Research and investigate Holocaust events, publishing new materials, introducing films. Also republish, promote, and distribute existing fundamental works of Holocaust history.
3. Establish cooperation with the leaders of Latvia, historians, and scholars in the research and study of our tragic Holocaust history.
4. Continue to convene annual Yiskor gatherings in memory of the Jews murdered in the Holocaust in Latvia.
5. Maintain cooperation with our sister organizations in Latvia, Israel, and elsewhere.
6. Attract 2nd, 3rd, and even 4th-generation Holocaust survivors to participate in Jewish Survivors of Latvia to continue our tasks and programs.

Now, returning to activities of the past year...

Although our organization is shrinking due to the aging and passing away of first-generation Holocaust survivors, it continues to function and remains vibrant. Jewish Survivors of Latvia continues to be active and meet the needs of the times, and to look to the future.

This year, so far, we have published three issues of the *Courier*. These contained a large amount of essential information about events in Latvia and in its Jewish community and about the history of Jews from Latvia with a focus on the Holocaust there.

We promoted and distributed Max Kaufmann's *Churbn Lettland*, Meyer Meller's monumental book *Jewish Latvia: Sites to Remember*, Frida Michelson's *I Survived Rumbula*, newly published and translated in several languages, Dr. George Schwab's *Odyssey of a Child Survivor*, and Rachel (Raya Westerman) Mazin's *My Life Journey*. Among others, we participated in the preparation and publishing of the book *Lipke's List* by Riga's Zhanis Lipke Museum.

Among other of our related activities, I would like to mention the participation of JSL members, including our board people, in the American premiere of *Baltic Truth* about Holocaust in Latvia narrated by Israeli Broadway star Dudu Fisher, director of the film: Eugene Levin. We were deeply thankful to our landsman Eugene Levin for this impressive cinema work. In conclusion, I extend my deep gratitude to all of you for participating in today's Memorial Service in the memory of Latvian Jews killed during the Holocaust. I hope to welcome you to our future gatherings.

I wish you many years of good health, productivity, and happiness in your family. Have a pleasant Thanksgiving and Happy Chanukkah!

AN ADDRESS BY ANDREJS PILDEGOVIČS, REPRESENTATIVE OF LATVIA TO THE U.N.

Good afternoon,
Dear David Silberman,
Dear Prof. George Schwab,
Dear Cantor Joseph Malovany,
Dear Mr. Ilja Lenskij,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Labdien, dāmas un kungi,

It is my great honor to attend once again, alongside my wife Elena, my daughter Lize, and Ms. Džūlija Bondare, trainee at the Latvian Mission to the UN, the annual commemoration of Holocaust victims and survivors of Latvia. Today, we pay tribute to the tragedy of Shoa that led to the annihilation of almost the entire Jewish population of Latvia. We pay tribute to the heroic survivors, the brave rescuers of Jews, and pass the memory of the Holocaust on to our children and grandchildren. In this context, I would like to highlight three positive developments:



Ambassador Andrejs Pildegovičs speaks at our Yizkor

First, I want to thank Ilja Lenskij for his detailed overview regarding the Law "On Goodwill Reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia" that was recently adopted by the Saeima (Parliament of Latvia). It represents yet another meaningful milestone in Latvia's continued efforts to restore justice and support the Jewish community

following the brutal Soviet and Nazi German occupations and repressions. I am truly pleased that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia has supported the translation of Dr. George Schwab's *Odyssey of a Child Survivor: From Latvia Through the Camps to the United States* into the Latvian language; I am very much looking forward to the presentation of this remarkable story in Latvia next year. It is extraordinary that Latvian Jewish community continues to be so vibrant. I truly enjoyed attending the 11th World Reunion of Liepāja/Libau Jews last July.

Second, I would like to stress that Latvia's relations with the United States and Israel are stronger than ever. Secretary Blinken has visited Latvia twice over the last year. Next week, Latvian president Egils Levits will pay a state visit to Israel to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between the Republic of Latvia and the State of Israel. On 11-12 July 2023, we look forward to the visit of President Biden to the Baltics in Vilnius, Lithuania, to attend the next NATO Summit. These ties are as strong as ever, and we will spare no effort in cultivating them further.

Third, I would like to stress that Latvia is strongly committed to Holocaust Remembrance, research, and education. Our delegation is very active at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. We work closely together with the Israeli delegation at the UN on fighting contemporary forms of antisemitism, hate speech, and disinformation, including in the digital

domain.

I would very much prefer to continue implementing the action-oriented, forward-looking agenda that I just alluded to. Regrettably, I must now draw your attention to the major black cloud that has been hanging over Europe since February 24. I refer to the deliberate military aggression waged by the Russian Federation against its peaceful neighbor—Ukraine—for the past nine months. This war was started under the false pretext of "denazification," triggering the largest humanitarian catastrophe in Europe since WWII. More than 17 million people have been displaced, more than 6 million have been forced to leave their country, thousands of civilians have lost their lives, property, and place of residence. As we meet today, more than four million Ukrainians are surviving without electricity, heat, water, and sanitation. For the first time since the end of WWII, we see blatant and barbaric state-sponsored terrorism, full-scale military invasion, premeditated dismemberment of an entire sovereign country, redrawing of borders, deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure, as well as de-humanizing rhetoric by Russian leadership toward Ukrainians. Today, Ukrainians are forcibly being denied their identity, language, history, and future. I would like to condemn in the strongest possible terms the antisemitic statements made by Minister Lavrov and other Russian officials against President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. Today, everyone who believes in freedom, human dignity, law, and solidarity must support Ukraine.

Every blanket, power generator, shipment of medicine is of vital importance. Latvia has provided 0.9% of its GDP in terms of economic, humanitarian, and military support for Ukraine. Latvia hosts about 36,000 Ukrainian women and children. About 3,600 are now attending Latvian schools. More than 60 Ukrainian babies have been born in Riga since February.

We have to continue the policy of sanctioning and isolating Russia and Belarus within international organizations. The UN Assembly has adopted five resolutions condemning Russia's aggression.

We must remain united moving forward—and the next goal should be creation of the special tribunal on Russia's crime of aggression. The ICC will deal with the war crimes committed by the Russian military on Ukrainian soil, including rapes, firing on "civilian targets, torture, etc." However, the special tribunal, like the Nuremberg trials, must address the "mother crime"—the crime of aggression committed by the Russian Federation and its political and military leadership. Without this mechanism of accountability, the international community will not be able to guarantee that such crimes will not be repeated yet again against another nation. There can be no impunity or statute of limitations for crimes against humanity. We are strongly committed to saying "Never Again." We will do our utmost to support Ukraine's self-defense and survival as an independent, democratic, European nation. I am grateful to all for the recommitment to our ideals, values, and faith that justice and light will ultimately prevail.

I thank you again for your kind invitation and wish everyone strong health, resilience, and perseverance! Slava Ukraine! Happy Hanukkah! *Dievs svētī Latviju!* God Bless Latvia!

A VERY SPECIAL ASPECT WITHIN THE HOLOCAUST IN LATVIA

In 2021, we commemorated the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in Latvia as well as throughout the former Soviet Union. But Latvia has two more tragic anniversaries in June—June 17 and June 14. The first is the day that the Soviets occupied Latvia in 1940; the second is the day of the deportations in 1941. It is important to note this in the story about the saviors who acted under the conditions of aggressive Nazi propaganda that claimed that everything that happened in 1940-41—the terror, arrests, and deportations—was the result of the actions of the Jews. Under these conditions, for those who were unsure, it was very easy to accept it. This was what Nazi propaganda and the Nazi policy of isolating the Jews were aimed at, so that Jews would gradually disappear from the public consciousness, that people would lose interest in and forget what happened to their Jewish neighbors and would accept acts of terror against them without emotion—possibly even with joy.

6 Skolas Street was home to the Jewish community in Riga. This was also the home of the Jewish Club in the 1920s and 1930s. It was photographed often and offered performances by many prominent figures in Jewish culture. This building now houses the “Jews in Latvia” museum. The museum focuses both on the Holocaust and the entire history of the Jews in Latvia. The museum was established in 1989 by the famous historian Margers Westermanis, a survivor of the Holocaust; he escaped from the camps in 1944, was involved in several oppositions, including local Latvian oppositions (not always pro-Soviet Union). He remains the curator and the main researcher in Latvia exploring the topic of saviors during the Holocaust.

From the very beginning of the museum’s research, Westermanis stated that the study of the Holocaust cannot exist without the study of the history of the Jews and without the history of salvation. We also must talk about the fate of the Jews brought to Latvia during the occupation, who were tortured and killed here. We also have to talk about the resistance movements during the Holocaust. For us, Jews resistance while they were being detained, living in ghettos and camps, as well as the resistance of those Jews who escaped from such places and hid or fought in opposition movements, and the rescue of Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors are all part of one phenomenon: fighting back against the Holocaust.

The museum is working on documenting a special map that looks rather bleak: yes, unfortunately, there are approximately 230 Holocaust-related sites in Latvia—murder sites, victims’ reburial sites, etc. However, there are also places of salvation. If one often speaks about the participation of neighbors in the murders of Jews, then one should also speak about other neighbors who saved Jews. It is a very layered story. Here are the statistics that Westermanis has been able to collect to date:

Saviors — 658

Known names: from this number — 463

(of which were repressed for helping Jews — 62)

Those whose fate is unknown — 195

Rescued — 638

Those who survived (from this number): 338

Those who did not survive: 134

Those whose fate is unknown: 166

Righteous Among the Nations: 138

Our colleagues often use the word “righteous” in their publications. We prefer to use the term “saviors.”

It must also be said that the Yad Vashem museum in Israel, which has stricter criteria for evaluating activities, often talks about

witnesses and demands as much direct evidence as possible, preferably from participants in the events. In general, few witnesses are left, at best, they are the children of real saviors. Sometimes the children of neighbors remember some events.

It is important to note that the people who saved the Jews were very different: artists, professors, janitors, acquaintances, and sometimes even complete strangers. All national and religious groups of Latvia are represented among the saviors, including clergy. Often, to save just one Jew, the efforts of many people and groups were needed, as was the case, for example, in the well-known cases of Frida Michelson and Valentina Freimane. Westermanis has designated the study of the motivation of saviors as one of his tasks. So far, a clear explanation for this phenomenon has not been found.



A monument to the saviors of Jews, near the memorial site of the burned Great Synagogue in Riga

In 2007, the Jewish community erected a monument located next to the memorial site of the burned Great Synagogue. Mourners lay flowers here in memory of the victims and in memory of the saviors. This has become an integral part of the ritual on the official day of remembrance of the Holocaust victims, celebrated on July 4.

The study of the salvation of the Jews in Latvia began in the 1960s. This was part of the work done by the Jewish activists. Riga was then considered one of the centers of the Jewish national movement in the Soviet Union (many have probably heard about the attempted plane hijacking of 1970). The first collection of texts about the saviors was the volume, *An Unusual Man Zhanis Lipke*, compiled by David Silberman, and Frida Michelson’s memoir, *I Survived Rumbula*, prepared for publishing by David Silberman as well. Both works came out in print in the late 1960s.

The memoirs of Valentina Frejmane proved to be one of the most important for Latvian society. In 2010, she wrote a memoir, *Farewell, Atlantis*, in which she described her life before and during the war, when she was in Riga. She was one of the leading Latvian cultural figures, as well as a well-known art historian, cinematographer, and popular teacher. She opened a movie club where fans came to watch and discuss Western films. This book showed that the Holocaust was not only something that happened to the Jews in general but is part of the life story of a popular person loved by many. It was an important turning point for many, helping break down barriers that persisted in society in regards to the Holocaust.

In 2014, the memoirs of Michelson were finally released in Latvian. The latest cultural product that highlighted this topic was the 2018 film *Father Night* about Zhanis Lipke that was viewed by tens of thousands of people all over Latvia, including school-aged children who went with their classes. The history of the saviors had finally begun to occupy a place in the public consciousness of Latvian society.

*By Ilya Lensky, director of the Jews in Latvia Museum
Translated by Eva Minkin*

MAX LASERSON: POLITICIAN, JURIST, PHILOSOPHER

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.

Laserson, Max (Matasija) (February 1, 1887, Mitau, Latvia – November 29, 1951, New York, New York, USA) — was a politician, jurist, and philosopher. He was a member of the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) and led the Tze'irei Zion Party during the interwar period in Latvia.

Max Laserson was born in Mitau (now Jelgava) into a Jewish merchant family. He graduated from Mitau Technical College and later from the Law Faculty of St. Petersburg University with a silver medal (1910). Afterwards, he worked in various Russian provinces for some time, continuing to study law in Berlin, Heidelberg, and Tartu. During his time at university, he began to actively publish articles on the general theory of law and issues of state law, along with translating articles on relevant topics. In 1916, he was appointed assistant professor (*privat-docent*) of constitutional and public law at Petrograd University, becoming the first Jew to hold this kind of position at the university. The following year, after the February Revolution in Russia, he joined the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Provisional Government and became Deputy Director for National Minorities in the Interior Ministry.

However, in 1920, he left Soviet Russia and returned to Latvia, which, by that time, had become an independent country. In Riga, he was involved in movements such as Hapoel Hatzair and Tze'irei Zion; he was even their deputy on the Zionist General Council in March of 1934.

From the beginning of his stay in Riga, Laserson's teaching services were in great demand. He taught at a Jewish high school, at Riga Commercial College, and taught at the Russian University Courses in Riga; all these were private institutions that provided higher education—he gave lectures on the general theory of law and other similar topics. He also gave lectures at other educational institutions and briefly attempted to earn a living as a lawyer.

Public Law and Constitutional Committee (1925-1931). In addition, he was a member of the International Association for the Protection of Minority Rights (for Jews in particular). He also was successful in getting permission for Jewish schools to teach in Hebrew, as opposed to the position of the Bund, which required them to teach solely in Yiddish. However, in the November 1931 election, Laserson lacked a few votes to be re-elected and dropped out.

The Latvian coup d'état of Ulmanis on May 15, 1934, brought about the abolishing of cultural autonomy for Jews and Laserson was banned as a leftist. In November of that same year, he was released from custody and was forced to leave Latvia. Later, in January of 1935, he immigrated to Mandatory Palestine. That year, he became one of the founders of the Higher School of Law and Economics in Tel Aviv, where he taught the general philosophy of law and economics. Nevertheless, as Laserson confessed in letters to his friends, he was not satisfied with his life in Palestine. The country itself was "small, poor, and under construction," and had no use for scholars dealing with abstract legal topics. Instead, it needed more workers, especially for construction. In addition, his salary as a professor in Tel Aviv, he wrote, was inadequate. If he wanted to continue his academic career, he had to move again.

Finally, after several unsuccessful attempts, in July of 1939, Laserson managed to obtain an American visa issued for research purposes. The war found him in Paris—from there, he went to London, and later, to the United States. In New York, he worked as a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and at the Institute of Jewish Affairs (the Research Institute of the World Jewish Congress). He also gave lectures at Columbia University. His time in America was the most productive of his life. During this period, he wrote many academic articles and non-academic pamphlets about topics he was an expert on before he moved to the United States.

Laserson was a polyglot whose dozens of publications were written in Russian, Yiddish, Latvian, German, Hebrew, French, and English. His main works were devoted to legal theory, focusing on revolution and law and the general theory of law. He also wrote about the rights of minorities and, in the later years of his life, discussed the problem of diplomatic relations between Russia (in particular, the Soviet Union) and the Western world. A special place in Laserson's research belonged to Jewish law, which was an interest of his throughout the years of his creative initiatives in Russia, Latvia, Palestine, and the United States.



The Higher School of Law and Economics in Tel Aviv, founded by Max Laserson in 1935



The covers of Max Laserson's works, reflecting his broad variety of interests. The fifth cover from the left, for The American Impact on Russia, published in 1950—a year before his death—was republished in New York in 1962

From 1922 to 1925, and then from 1928 to 1931, he served as a deputy (Zionist-Socialist Party) of the Saeima, where he worked together with left-wing parties and served as secretary of the

By Ivar Brod, translated by Aviva Solovey

WITH THANKS



Editor's Note: Exactly twenty years ago, on November 21, 2002, at the meeting of NATO Heads of State in Prague, Czech Republic, Latvia and six other candidate states were invited to join NATO. This marked the beginning of the final stage for Latvia to become a

NATO Member State, which took place on March 29, 2004. We are publishing an excerpt from the notes of the U.S. Ambassador to Latvia at the time, James Howard Holmes, describing the involvement of two JSL leaders—Steven Springfield and George Schwab—in this process. Both of them experienced the horrors of the ghettos and concentration camps during the war. Due to lack of space, the editorial team does not include in the text of this article the significant contributions of Latvian politicians in the acceptance of Latvia into NATO, which was described in the Ambassador's account as well.

John F. Kennedy is credited with the expression: "Success has a thousand fathers." Latvia's successful candidacy for NATO membership is surely such a case, but three "fathers" and one "mother" stand out in my mind: President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, former Minister of Defense Girts Kristovskis, and two Latvian Americans and Holocaust survivors, two unsung heroes of NATO membership: Steven Springfield and George Schwab.

Both George and Steven were able to make their ways to the United States at the end of WW II and to create new lives for themselves and to raise families: George as an academic in New York City and Steven as a Long Island businessman.

The re-engagement and re-investment of Steven and George in Latvia's future at the end of the 20th century are a testament to the power of forgiveness. Despite what had happened to their families in Latvia, both saw the return of Latvia's independence from an American perspective and viewed the security of the Baltics in terms of NATO. They were determined to provide sustained support to Latvia's struggling Jewish community and appropriate memorialization of the terrible events that marked the Holocaust in Latvia. Beyond this, however, they determined to assist Latvia's president and governments to prepare for NATO membership. They knew that no aspiring state could become a new member without first passing through the qualifying matrix, including a candid encounter with its Holocaust-related past. And they knew further that Holocaust survi-



Former President of Latvia Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Steven Springfield and George Schwab

vors were uniquely empowered to approve—or to veto—every nation's progress in this regard.

George, as President of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy and member of the President's Historical Commission, and Steven, as President of the Jewish Survivors of Latvia, were the strongest supporters on every count. They provided fora for President Vaira Vike-Freiberga to speak to Jewry's most influential groups and leaders about Latvia's growing maturity on Holocaust issues. They were central to the rebuilding of the Jewish community: schools, hospitals, community centers, synagogues, restitution issues in Liepaja and Riga, and places of remembrance. They worked closely within the Historical Commission on publications, the training of history teachers about the Holocaust, and the political compromises necessary for the Commission to deal fairly, but separately, with the Holocaust on the one hand and Soviet subjugation of Latvia on the other. Throughout, they kept up regular communication with Jewish groups globally, but particularly in the United States, about Latvia's steady progress to confront its history and then to acknowledge it. Truly, without Steven and George on Latvia's side, the success of its NATO candidacy would have been very questionable.

*By James Howard Holmes,
former U.S. Ambassador to Latvia*

Dear JSL members and friends,

Your membership fee and donations are vital sources of funds for our organization, including publication of the *Courier* and organizing meetings. These publications keep you informed of our various activities and events in Latvia.

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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. The Israeli Embassy in Latvia opened in October 1992. On November 28-29, the Egils Levits, president of Latvia, paid a state visit to Israel, leading a delegation of 55 people, including both statesmen of the republic and businessmen. The trip included a visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial Complex, the laying a wreath at the National Cemetery on Mount Herzl, meetings with I. Herzog, president of Israel, and Prime Minister Y. Lapid, as well as with B. Netanyahu, chairman of the Likud Party. The Likud won the last election and is in the process of forming a government coalition. Levits also met with representatives of the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, among many other events. Much attention was also paid to the events aimed at improving economic relations between the two nations.



President E. Levits and President I. Herzog

On the first day of the visit, November 28, a state ceremony welcoming the presidents was held at the presidential residence in Jerusalem. President Herzog greeted President Levits in Latvian, reminding him that he considers himself partly Latvian because his grandmother, Sara Herzog, née Hillman, was born in Riga, and he is proud of his family roots. He further said: "We look forward to using your visit as an opportunity to discuss ways to expand our partnership, with a focus on trade and commerce, joint research, and academic collaboration. We are grateful to Latvia for signing the Law on Voluntary Compensation to the Latvian Jewish community, which is a very important step in the restitution of Jewish community property in Latvia." (Note that among those who accompanied President Levits was Dmitry Krupnikov, head of the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund). President Levits, in turn, thanked Herzog for the reception and noted the great importance of the visit for strengthening bilateral relations.

As part of the business forum, Latvian entrepreneurs visited the Israel Manufacturers Association, signing several cooperation agreements between the leading Israeli medical centers Sheba, Schneider, Shaare Zedek, Ichilov and Pauls Stradinsh University of Latvia.

The one item that remained unfinished during the visit was the expected signing of a bilateral agreement on dual citizenship, which would allow immigrants from Latvia in Israel to maintain not only cultural and historical ties, but also legal ties with Latvia. The agreement was not able to be signed as the new coalition government is still in the process of being formed.

In general, as the visit of President Levits demonstrated, both sides are focused on further development of bilateral cooperation.

Last summer in Liepaja, at the invitation of the Jewish Heritage of Liepaja Foundation and the Jews in Latvia Museum, a group of scientists from the United States, including geophysicists, geodesists, and archaeologists among others, conducted research in the area. The group examined places that they believed contained mass graves of Jews executed primarily at the beginning of WWII. The area where the group conducted their work was identified via a short amateur film that was shot in the summer of 1941 by a German sailor, Reinhard Wiener. The two main locations searched were the dunes of Shkede near the lighthouse and the old fish cannery, as well as an enormous earthen hill in the Jewish section of the Livsky cemetery in Liepaja.



Top: *A frame taken from the Weiner film showing Jewish men being hurried to the murder trench to be shot and buried, with the lighthouse in the upper right corner as a point of reference*

Bottom: *A photograph taken in summer 2021, with a similar perspective to the previous photo, and the storage/workshop areas added to the west side of the World War I fortress clearly visible*

The group of scientists from the U.S.—Philip Reeder, Ph.D., Duquesne University, Harry Jol, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, and others, under the general supervision of Professor Richard Freund—do not do the very labor-intensive excavations. Instead, for the past 20 years, they have been conducting their work with the help of specialized equipment and modern non-invasive methods, which explore the depths of the earth underneath, thus revealing many unknown objects. And, in the case of this project, proving already irrefutable facts about the history of the Holocaust in Liepaja. The result of the work was the discovery

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

and determination of the exact parameters of ditches with mass graves of the Holocaust victims in the Shkede dunes and in the area around the lighthouse.

Since important discoveries were made at the site near Liepaja Lighthouse and in other places, scientists are proposing to continue their work in 2023.

From 5th to 9th of September 2022, the University of Latvia hosted an international conference “Eastern European Displaced Persons, Refugees, and POWs during and after the Holocaust,” organized by the Jewish Studies Center of the University of Latvia in cooperation with the Jews in Latvia Museum of Riga and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Other organizers of the conference were Arolsen Archives (Germany), Yad Vashem (Israel), Yahad in Unum (France), and other leading organizations devoted to this topic.



The conference was opened by Daniel Newman, Program Manager from U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

During the conference, issues of working with archival materials from the period of the Second World War were considered. The organizers and conference participants discussed the possibilities of working with diaries, letters, and memoirs. The focus was also on case studies of descriptions of monuments and memorials dedicated to the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

The conference was opened by Andrea Löw from the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Institute for Contemporary History (Munich); she gave a lecture “Our Days Were Numbered. German-speaking Jews deported to Riga: Expectations, Realities, Reactions,” which was dedicated to the memories (diaries, letters) of German-speaking Jews about their deportation to Riga.

Another report on the Latvian topic was presented by Richards Plavnieks from Florida Southern College—“Report about a Recent Legion Controversy and a Path Forward: Camp 2227, the ‘Latvian Beehive’ Monument, and the Proposed Solution by an Academic Panel.

An important part of the conference was the presentation of new scientific publications devoted to military and pre-war letters, as well as digital archives and projects related to databases of those killed and deported during the war (their fates and biographies).

About 20 researchers from the USA, Germany, Latvia, Israel, France, the Czech Republic, and other countries took part in the conference.

On September 14, 2022, at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan, the troubling documentary *Baltic Truth* premiered

in America. The film was created by young documentary filmmakers under the direction of Eugene Levin, a native of Riga, living in Boston. The film, narrated throughout by the Israeli Broadway star Dudu Fisher, is dedicated to the tragic pages of the Holocaust in Latvia and Lithuania. The perpetrators of these terrible crimes were largely local fascists rather than German occupying forces. Some of these murderers are now hailed as national heroes because of their role in resisting communism during the 1940 Soviet occupation and the postwar period, when Latvia and Lithuania were annexed and incorporated into the Soviet Union. The vast majority of Latvian and Lithuanian Jews were murdered in the summer and autumn of 1941, following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union. Fisher, whose ancestors were Latvian and Lithuanian Jews, guides us through these gruesome events as he travels from place to place.

One of the first episodes of the film tells how on July 18, 1941, most of the Jewish population—175 people—in the small Latvian town of Akniste were murdered by local Latvian nationalists. By the time German troops arrived days later, Akniste was proclaimed “Judenfrei” (German for free of Jews). It was simply by chance that 20-year-old Mozus Berkovich survived. The only testimony to this horrific event was recorded and shown in this movie 72 years later by his grandson, Eugene Levin, months before Mozus passed away.

Fisher reports directly from the places where, in 1941, mass executions of Jews were carried out: in the Rumbula forest on the outskirts of Riga, in Ponary near Vilnius, and in the 9th Fort in Kaunas, a facility specially built by czarist Russia to protect the city from German incursions.

As the film points out, the Lithuanian researcher Ruta Vanaigaitė was hounded out of the country after her book on the Holocaust was published.

The final part of the film discusses that some Lithuanians and Latvians opposed the execution and extermination of Jews but were unable to help them. Nonetheless, 918 Lithuanians and 438 Latvians who came to the rescue of the Jews were honored by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, as Righteous Gentiles.

Baltic Truth has been accepted for participation in several U.S. and international film festivals, after which it will be shown in cinemas.

September 1st marked the centennial anniversary of the birth of the outstanding historian Joel Weinberg (1922-2011), who taught at the Daugavpils Institute (now Daugavpils University) for 30 years.

Joel Weinberg was born in Riga into a family of a wealthy busi-



The poster for the film Baltic Truth

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

nessman; in 1940 he graduated from high school and was accepted to the Faculty of History of the University of Latvia. In 1941-43, he was a prisoner of the Riga ghetto; until 1945 he was in several concentration camps in Latvia and Germany, including Buchenwald. Upon his release in 1945, Weinberg returned to Riga, resumed his studies at the university, completing the entire program in just one year. In 1946-48 and 1951-62, he worked as the chief bibliographer of the State Library of the Latvian SSR (earning his PhD in 1954). In 1948-51, he taught history at the University of Latvia, as an associate professor from 1962, and then professor (Doctor of Historical Sciences, 1974), finally becoming the Head of the Department at the Daugavpils Pedagogical Institute (1976-1982). In 1991-1992, Weinberg became the first Rector of the Jewish Open University in Riga (with branches in Vilnius and St. Petersburg).



Joel Weinberg

Since 1993 until his death, Weinberg lived in Jerusalem, where, in 1994, he was appointed a professor at the Department of the Bible and the Ancient East at the University named after David Ben-Gurion in Negev. The main works of Professor Weinberg are devoted to the study of the Bible and the history and literature of the ancient Jews and other peoples of the Middle East.

For Weinberg's centennial, Daugavpils University prepared a collection "Joel Weinberg. Photo. Memories. Facts," which contains the memoirs of his colleagues—historians and philologists, as well as graduates from different years; portions of interviews; photographs, including those from personal archives.

From the 12th to 14th of August, an audiovisual performance "Silence Falls" took place in Cēsis; those attending included residents of the city, as well visitors from other areas who came specifically for the event, including representatives of the Jewish community of Riga. The organizers of the performance describe it as a prayer for the dead and a tribute to the memory of the Jewish community of Cēsis, which was destroyed during the Holocaust in



The "Silence Falls" performance

August of 1941.

To create a sense of intimacy, the performance was conducted 1:1 via headphones—a single voice spoke to each of those in attendance. Then the people gathered in the square and proceeded to march to the same forest on the outskirts of the city where 200 Cēsis Jews were killed 81 years ago.

Here in the forest, one voice in headphones was replaced by several other young voices of the world-famous Latvian mixed youth choir "Kamēr. . ." who performed a new work by composer Kristis Auznieks. The a cappella performance passed smoothly from Yiddish to Hebrew, from Hebrew to Latvian. The individual listeners were left with the forest, the singing of the choir, and their own thoughts. The creators of the idea and the directors of this event: artists Krista and Reinis Dzudzilo, poet Merita Maloja, and project curator, Elina Kalnina.

In March and December of 2018, the *Courier* reported on a Jewish family "clan" that bore the surname Kuklya/Kuklia and the like. The roots of this family have been growing from the Latvian city of Rezekne since about the 17th century; it has grown to hundreds and hundreds of cousins that are unfamiliar with one another. They all found each other thanks to the enthusiasm of one of them, Ian Levine from London, when in the early 1990s he began interviewing several of his grandmother's cousins to find as much family information as he could before he began his search.



Members of Manhattan Kukla Reunion

"If I had started now, with the prevalence of internet, I wouldn't have to trace them," Levine reflected. "I had a pen and wrote down everything that they said on scraps of paper." Levine began to trace the British branch of the family, whose last name evolved from Kuklya to Cooklin, and other similar spellings, after his great-great-grandfather, Hatzkel Kuklya, came to England from Latvia-Lithuania in the 1800s. With the help of a genealogist, Levine eventually found all ten Kuklya siblings—Hatzkel and his eight brothers and one sister. Using ancestry websites and DNA testing, more familial relationships were confirmed, and Levine added to the growing Kuklya records by combining his tree with others.

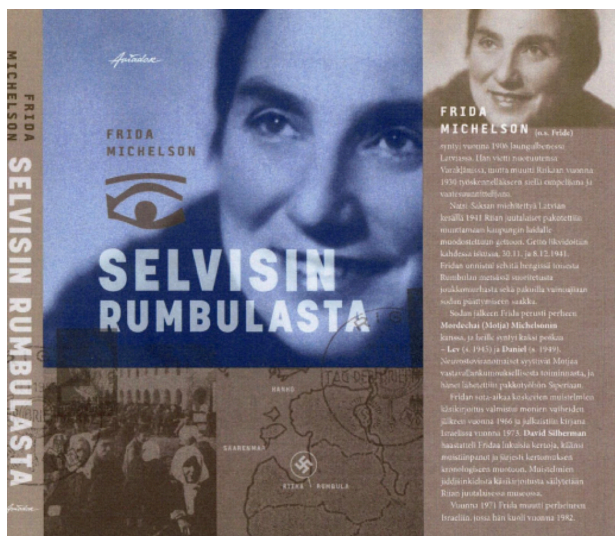
At the beginning of the 21st century, newly found relatives began to gather for family events. As discovered in 2016, among the members of this extended clan were also members of our own JSL, now bearing the names of Taukule, Naisteter, Brod, Erig, and oth-

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

ers. The second Kuklya Reunion in 2017, also in London, England, had more than 500 attendees. The third one, the Latvia Kuklya Reunion, took place in 2018 in the Latvian town of Rezekne, where the family story began, with about 100 attendees from all parts of the world. The fourth, the Israel Kuklya Reunion took place in 2019 in Haifa, with 150 attendees. The latest chapter of the Kuklya family saga, the USA Kuklya Reunion was held on August 9th, 2022, with about 80 attendees.

For many participants, this whole project became important because most members of their former families were killed in the Holocaust, so for decades they thought their families were very small. They always looked for family and being part of this growing clan; the reunions gave them that feeling.

In October of this year, Aviador Publishing released a Finnish translation of a book of memoirs that is well known not only to the readers of the *Courier* and JSL members, but also to all the Jews of Latvia who survived the massacre on December 8, 1941—*Survived Rumbula* by Frida Michelson.



The Finnish cover of Frida Michelson's book of memoirs

We congratulate Frida's relatives in Israel on this occasion, as well as our friend, David Silberman, who translated Frida's notes from Yiddish and made the first literary recording of her memoirs more than 50 years ago.

In the preface to the Finnish edition, David wrote a dedication to Finland and its President, Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim:

"In a way, this book is not for Finland. The events described in these pages could not happen in Finland. When Hitler demanded that President Mannerheim deport Finnish Jews to Polish concentration camps, the President sharply refused and resolutely answered, 'We have no Jews in Finland, only Finns live here, without distinction of race or religion.' Mannerheim refused to comply with Hitler's demand, although he was his unwilling ally. Finnish Jews fought in Mannerheim's army, even defending their country against their Jewish brothers in the Red Army in the bloody, aggressive war that the U.S.S.R. waged against Finland from 1939 to 1940."

On December 8, Splendid Palace Cinema in Riga hosted the premiere of the documentary film *We Are Just Beginning* by

director Marta Herts, in which Margers Westermanis, who was born in 1925, talks about his life. Herts first met Westermanis, historian and founder of the Jews in Latvia Museum, in 2017. Their conversations went on for almost six years, and the film is finally ready. The life story of Westermanis is unique as he is one of the few survivors of the Holocaust. How is it possible to live such a fulfilling life after everything he's been through? The filmmakers explain: "By touching on a painful period in the history of Latvia, our film is not just a story about Margers Westermanis. This is a story about a person's place in life after experiencing an unimaginable tragedy, about how what happened changed not only him, but those around him. And it is also a story about us today." Although the film reflects on the most difficult times in the history of Latvian Jews and personally Westermanis, it is life-affirming because his family and scientific work encouraged him in his accomplishments.



A still from the documentary *We Are Just Beginning*

The film talks about the respect and the self-respect that accompanied Westermanis's research on the rescuers of the Jews and, in a certain way, created the narrative that prompted the inhabitants of Latvia to think about the fate of their Jewish neighbors.

During the filming, Westermanis visited notable places and shared the memories of his experiences in the Riga ghetto and in the Kaiservald and Popervalde concentration camps. Part of the filming took place on the Engure River, which flows through the Dundaga forests, where Westermanis stayed after escaping from the concentration camp until the end of the war. For Margers the river symbolizes an intermediate state between life and death, allowing you to draw parallels between his life and his desire to live in the present, even though the memory of the bygone world and survival continues to torment him in his sleep.

The Westermanis family has always been musical; this is represented in the film by the music of Denis Pashkevich. The film's crew included cameramen Andrey Rudzat and Tom Shkele, the editing director Madara Didrihsone, the sound engineer Girt Bishs, and the artist Aigars Hercans.

Compiled by Ivar Brod
Translated by Marija Taukule