



The Latvian Jewish Courier

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE MEETING IN NEW JERSEY

It's become a tradition that the annual meeting—Truth About the Holocaust and Stalinist Repression—invites guests from abroad; for the second time in a row, Latvian representatives participated in the January 29, 2020, meeting held at Bergen Community College in Paramus. The meeting opened with an address by Dr. Joan Rivitz of the New Jersey State Commission for Holocaust Education; she was followed by a candle-lighting ceremony in memory of victims of Holocaust. Among the speakers was Rabbi Mordechai Kanelsky from Bris Avrohom (founded by the Lubavitch Rebbe in 1979 to help Russian Jewish immigrants who were settling in the Metropolitan area).



Lighting candles before the awards ceremony—event organizer Lydmila Prakhina in the center, Lolita Tomsone and Maruta Plivda on the far right

The rabbi made a moving speech and was greeted fervently by the crowd. Powerful and emotional fragments from the documentary film *The Soviet Story*, about Stalinist era, were shown. Also, high school and college students presented their writing compositions and artwork. The meeting also featured a string ensemble from the Julliard School and a vocal performance by young members of the Swinton family: Max, Alexa, and Eva and others.

Latvia was represented by two very special guests: Lolita Tomsone, Director of Zhanis Lipke Memorial in Riga, and Maruta Plivda, the Mayor of Preili.

We would like to introduce these two distinguished Latvian women to our readers.

Ms. Tomsone studied at Latvian Academy of Culture and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and worked as a journalist for Radio Free Europe; she has published articles about Jewish culture and social politics in the magazine *Rigas Laiks* and other media outlets. She currently holds an important position in Latvian cultural and political life as the Director of Zhanis Lipke Memorial. Under her leadership, the memorial has become one of the most significant educational and commemorative places

in Latvia. It is dedicated to Zhanis Lipke and members of his family, who risked their lives in the 1940s by rescuing Jews from the Riga Ghetto, sheltering them, and providing refuge.

Ms. Tomsone, who initiated “A Procession of Memory,” has organized a fight against fascism and anti-Semitism dedicated to those who, during World War II, risked their lives to save Jews. In the current issue, we are publishing an article by Ms. Tomsone about Zhanis Lipke Memorial’s activities and events.

Ms. Plivda graduated from Daugavpils University, earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology. She also holds a degree in social studies from Rezekne University. In 2014, she was elected Mayor of Preili. In her presentation, “Contribution of Preili Municipality to the Preservation of the Holocaust Memorial and Jewish Cultural Heritage,” she emphasized that Jews have always been part of Preili’s history since the arrival of first Jewish merchants at the beginning of 19th century. In 1935, Preili’s population was 1,662, half (51%) of whom were Jews. There were four synagogues and one school for Jewish children. On June 28, 1941, German army troops entered Preili; the Jewish community was soon massacred—just a few families managed to escape. Preili can boast of individuals like Vladislavs Vuškāns, who sheltered and thus saved six Jews in his home from 1941 to 1944. Posthumously, Mr. Vuškāns received, in 2004, from Yad va-Shem the award Righteous Among the Nations.



Lolita Tomsone presents a Silver Log to David Silberman

Preili is actively involved in preservation of its Jewish cultural heritage. In 2004, a memorial to Holocaust victims was erected in the city; gatherings to honor and remember Jewish victims of the Holocaust are held every year in August. In 2015, a Memorial Arch dedicated to the Preili Jewish community was built.

One of the city’s latest significant projects was to identify and conserve the exact location where Jewish inhabitants of Preili were shot and their bodies burnt. This place was discovered a few years ago, located not far from the Jewish cemetery. Through the years, the area became unrecognizable—with a road

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE MEETING IN NEW JERSEY (continued)

running right above this mass grave. Preili is now developing a plan to re-route that road, erect a new stone monument with names of victims listed, and add this property to the existing memorial—thus completing the creation of Memorial Park that commemorates victims of Holocaust. All these became possible because of the efforts of Mayor Maruta Plivda.

At the conclusion of the gathering, Ms. Tomsone and Ms. Plivda were awarded a Certificate of Participation for their involvement in the Holocaust remembrance activities and

their support of keeping the memory of this tragic time in Latvia.

The President of JSL, David Silberman, was one of the honored guests and was presented the traditional award of the Silver Log by Ms. Tomsone in recognition of his tireless activity in preserving the memory of Holocaust victims in his native city of Preili. The log is symbolic of the firewood covered bunker where Lipke hid several dozen Jews during the Nazi occupation in Latvia.

By **Semyon Gizunterman**

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND ELUCIDATIVE WORK OF ZHANIS LIPKE MEMORIAL (ZhLM)

The Lipke Memorial is dedicated to the rescue of Jews in Latvia and the incredible story of the Lipke family. We do need heroes who are not necessarily paragons but still have an ethical core. Such a one was Zhanis Lipke, who was of simple background and had even been a smuggler of goods in Riga Port. When the rest of the population—out of fear or greed became law-abiding citizens—he had the courage to risk his family and his children to organize rescue of Jews from the Riga Ghetto and surrounding concentration camps.

We take Zhanis Lipke to be an inspiration to younger generations because he used his smuggling skills to conceive of and organize a Jewish rescue mission. We want young people to think for themselves—not to live by lazy stereotypes picked up from someone else or from media.

That is the reason the museum's major theme works so well for school groups now—not only to learn about the Holocaust in Latvia, but to have the Lipke family's history inspire and motivate them and also to learn of the nannies hiding Jewish kids, of priests being brave enough to oppose the murder of mentally ill in Aglona.

We do need these silent heroes who proved that not

all people in Latvia were won over by Nazi propaganda. We have stories of Jewish rescue, we have great examples of doctors trying to rescue mentally ill people.

During the last six years, the Lipke memorial has organized courses for teachers that help to put anti-Semitism into a wider discussion of lack of tolerance, xenophobia, and fake news. In Latvia, we have a program initiated by the Ministry of Education called School Bag (in

Latvian "Skolas soma")—the program gives every school the opportunity to visit museums or attend movies.

In 2019, more than 100 groups of schoolchildren between 7th and 10th grades and students (altogether about 3,000 youngsters) took part in excursions and lectures hosted by the museum's programs: "Rescuers of Jews in Latvia," "Zhanis Lipke and the movie 'The Mover,'" "Silent Heroes: the Lipke Family Story," and others. More than 5,000 people took part in the discussions and seminars organized during the last two years (2-3 monthly) by the museum within the forum "Riga Talks," which presented books, concerts, and meetings with interesting people—directors, actors, artists, and public figures from Latvia, Germany, and Russia.

Every year on November 30, in memory of the Jews who were shot in Rumbula in November and December of 1941, we organize a candle-lighting for the residents and guests of Riga at the Liberty Monument. Between 500 and 1,000 people gather there every year.

In 2018, the museum published in Latvian a collection of articles and memories *The Rescuer of People Zhanis Lipke*. The collection will also be published in English and Russian in 2020.

Since the movie about Zhanis Lipke came out, it has been an amazing experience to receive students who already have seen the film. These young people have gotten their first impressions of the Holocaust in Riga. They have questions, they want to know more. We do organize series of discussions,



At the February 1, 2020, celebration of Zhanis Lipke's 120th birthday, Maris Gailis, the founder of ZhLM (left), handed the Silver Log and certificate of honor to the descendants of Arseny Kornilov—a forester who knew the surroundings well and saved several Jewish families during the Holocaust

BOARD

JEWISH SURVIVORS OF LATVIA, INC.

President David Silberman
Vice Presidents Prof. George Schwab
Joseph Faerber, Esq.
Secretary, Editor of *Courier* Dr. Ivar Brod

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Dr. Michael Dumesh
Aelita Fitingof
Semyon Gizunterman
Mitchell Lieber
Lev Posvolsky
Yefim Shteynfeld

Please send your letters, photos, and other materials to:

JSL c/o David Silberman
64-14 137th Street
Flushing, NY 11367
Tel: (718) 886-3840
Fax: (718) 865-4279
E-mail: davidsilbermanpe@gmail.com

WWW.JEWISHSURVIVORSOFLATVIA-USA.COM

REMEMBERING SHEILA JOHNSON ROBBINS



Long-term member of JSL Sheila Johnson Robbins, true and loyal friend to many of us and generous donor to Jewish organizations in the United States and in Latvia, passed away on February 3, 2020.

Born in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, she graduated from Fort Hamilton High School and from the Tobe-Coburn School, and then for several years was a Beauty Director for Henri Bendel. Later, she served on boards of a few public organizations, including the Elie Wiesel Foundation and the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE). Appointed by two U.S.

presidents, Ronald Reagan in 1987 and George H. W. Bush in 1991, to the US Holocaust Memorial Council, she served the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, located in Washington, D.C., for more than 30 years. During these years, she regularly funded JSL with generous grants for charitable purposes, mostly for needy people in Latvia—our brethren in Riga and Liepaja (Libau). Each grant was specifically marked with wording such as: “Summer recreation for seniors,” “Liepaja Jewish cemetery,” “Rehabilitation activities for clients of the welfare center,” “Eleonora Schwab Library.” Her very last donation, made in January 2020, was to Riga’s volunteer organization EZRA and designated “To give food to needy people.” We have lost a very warm-hearted and devoted friend. Her quick-wittedness, compassion, and strength will be greatly missed.

movie screenings, even a serious theater production (*Lessons of the Persian Language* in Russian and Latvian) that dealt with forgiveness, with life in the camps, and loss of humanity. Beginning in November 2017, this play ran for 24 performances for 2,800 spectators.

Since we are on the island, we sometimes move closer to the city center to reach different audiences; these involve discussions about the bystanders during the Nazi occupation or testimonies of Holocaust survivors we have screened at Kaņepes Cultural Center on 15 Skolas Street. These offerings have always brought together different people, those who would probably not visit the museum.

The museum also travels around Latvia and tells about those Latvians, Russians, and Baltic Germans who rescued their fellow men, women and children.

We have mounted exhibitions of Alexandra Belcova’s sketches of the Riga Ghetto and about Underground Riga with hiding places. These exhibitions are always accompanied by educational programs. For example, we currently have an exhibition dealing with human fears, our desire to hide the dark part of us, that includes comics made to engage the younger generation. This exhibition shows how the Villi Frisch’s story looks when turned into the comics’ form by artist Daniil Vyatkin. The same exhibition offers a series of expressive drawings by D. Vyatkin on the theme of rescuers and those rescued.



Students on a field trip to the museum

Our educator Maija Meiere has come up with a way to tell different rescue stories that do not have a happy ending; the technique highlights the different people with different social status. Jews who were hidden underground or in attics, in bunkers, in pits, or who lived outside with fake documents—all these rescue stories sound equally incredible to people today who live rather protected lives. Our goal is to show that even in the darkest times people made the right decision and saw every human being as a worthy soul to be guarded and preserved.

ZhLM organized free tours of “Underground Riga”—a walk for students and adults to 12 places in Riga where the rescues occurred. Also, with the help of the State Cultural Capital Foundation, we finished preparing the mobile app “Underground Riga” for devices (phone, iPad, laptop) in five languages (Latvian, Russian, English, German, Hebrew); it describes 31 hiding places.

We all in the Zhanis Lipke Memorial do hope that all our activities will open doors to empathy and understanding for all; most especially that Latvian Jews were and are a part of the Latvian history and the very fabric of Latvian life. The only way to fight anti-Semitism is to let people in our country learn more about their own history, to deal with the fact that most Latvians during the Holocaust and World War II were not in Arajs Commando or among Jewish rescuers—but the biggest fear and the warning should be that most of us could see what was happening and just turned away, because it was happening to someone else.

We are now initiating fund-raising for the new education center of the memorial.



One of the drawings by the artist Daniil Vyatkin, on display at the Zhanis Lipke Memorial

By Lolita Tomsone, Director of the Zhanis Lipke Memorial

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CUKURS CASE

In this brief summary we relate some aspects of criminal case investigated by the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Latvia (hereinafter Prosecutor's Office) against Herberts Cukurs—prominent pilot in pre-World War II Latvia and officer with SD Auxiliary Latvian police (Arajs Kommando) during the Nazi occupation—and the reactions of the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia (hereinafter Council) and some of the victims of the Nazis to decisions made in this criminal case.

In February 2019, Latvian mass media published information about the Prosecutor's Office decision, made in October 2018, to close the criminal case against Herberts Cukurs because elements of a crime under Section 71 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Latvia (Genocide) have not been established in the activities of Cukurs (hereinafter the Decision). The investigation was opened in 2005; all through the time of the investigation, the family of Herberts Cukurs and his admirers from rightist circles have attempted to present him as a national hero and to re-inter his remains in Brethren Cemetery in Riga, alongside of those who fought for Latvia's independence in 1918-1920. The idea of re-interring Cukurs' remains was strongly criticized in 2011 and 2019 by the Presidential Commission of Historians as well as Brethren Cemetery Committee.



Former Professor of Hebrew University of Jerusalem Jehuda Leo Feitelson (Z"l), who passed away in February 2020, was an inmate of the Riga Ghetto. In spring 2019, he recorded testimony which became one of the main grounds for the Latvian Prosecutor's office to reopen Cukurs' case

In March 2019, the Council received a copy of the Decision. After Council leadership reviewed the Decision, members were shocked by its content and conclusions: that elements of a crime under Section 71 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Latvia (Genocide) have not been established in the activities of Cukurs. The prosecutor, who made the Decision without any reasonable grounds, ignored and rejected as unsuitable for use in the investigation numerous testimonies of eyewitnesses that establish Cukurs' guilt in killings and other crimes against the Jewish population of Latvia during World War II, while recognizing as true Cukurs' own testimony stating that he had never killed or committed

any other crime against Jews. Moreover, the prosecutor did not consider the nature of the Arajs Commando. Whereas it is unequivocally known and proven that Arajs Commando was established with the goal of "cleansing Latvia from harmful elements" and was directly subordinated to Einsatzgruppe A—a constituent part of the German Sicherheitsdienst (SD) (Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS), which was acknowledged to be a criminal organization by the Nuremberg Tribunal and the special Nuremberg Einsatzgruppe case verdict.



Yakob Basner, a former prisoner of the Riga Ghetto currently living in California, who testified about Cukurs' acts in the Ghetto

With the help of Elie Valk, head of the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, and Ivar Brod of Jewish Survivors of Latvia (USA), the Council has found, got in touch with, and met with witnesses now living in Israel and USA who saw Cukurs in the area of the Riga Ghetto while convoying prisoners to Rumbula Forest—the place of mass executions—in autumn of 1941. This evidence strongly echoes numerous other accounts given by witnesses on different occasions in different countries between the late 1940s and the late 1990s that were submitted to the Prosecutor's Office in 2016.

In the same time, the Council found out about and got in touch with heirs of Cukurs' victim Abram Shapiro, whose family suffered from Cukurs' actions during World War II. The Shapiro family was ousted by Cukurs from their Riga apartment, which Cukurs then occupied; he also appropriated their belongings. Abram Shapiro, aged 16, was sent by Cukurs to forced labor at a garage of the Arajs Commando. His father was arrested at the beginning of the Nazi occupation, incarcerated in Central Prison, and then killed. Abram, together with his mother, later got to Riga Ghetto, where his mother died. After World War II, Mr. Shapiro settled in the United States. He died in 2013.

In April 2019, the Council and the victims presented to the General Prosecutor of the Republic of Latvia a request to reopen the criminal case against Cukurs in view of the availability of new facts, documentary evidence, and victims. At the end of May 2019, the Prosecutor's Office made the following decision (hereinafter new decision) stating that the new evidence (account of Israeli witness [see above]) that the Council had submitted to the Prosecutor's Office was not a strong enough to reopen the criminal case against Cukurs. The evidence was deemed to have not disclosed any new crucial facts and had offered only that Cukurs had

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CUKURS CASE (continued)

been in the Riga Ghetto but did not prove that Cukurs killed people or committed any other crimes; that the witness had seen Cukurs convoying the prisoners of the Riga Ghetto did not constitute any new development. After the new decision had been made, the Council received a letter from the Prosecutor's Office stating that the criminal case will not be reopened. Currently, the Council's arguments on the illegality of the Decision are being evaluated and a final decision on reopening the criminal case against Cukurs has not yet been made.

The Council's responded as follows: It immediately submitted an appeal stating that the Council and the victims disagree with the new decision since witness accounts that were submitted to the Prosecutor's Office clearly stated that in the Riga Ghetto Cukurs was part of the Nazi's repressive structure and was convoying people to the mass killing. During this conveyance, many people were killed in the Riga Ghetto—showing that Cukurs directly participated in these crimes. During next two months, the Council collected new evidence proving Cukurs' direct guilt in the murders of Jews in the Riga Ghetto and submitted such evidence to the Prosecutor's Office.

On September 16, 2019, the Latvian Prosecutor General's Office issued a press release on the cancellation of its own decision to terminate the so-called Cukurs' case to news agencies. The release says: In mid-September, the senior Prosecutor of the Department of Investigation of particularly important cases of the Criminal Department of the Prosecutor's Office, Modris Adlers, completed the verification of the legality and validity of the termination of the named criminal process. During the audit, it was found



Latvijas Republikas Prokuratūra

AKTUALITĀTES

Publicēts 16/09/2019

Atcelts lēmums par H.Cukura krimināllietas izbeigšanu

Ģenerālprokuratūras Krimināltiesiskā departamenta Sevišķi svarīgu lietu izmeklēšanas nodaļas virsprokurors Modris Adlers atcēlis lēmumu par tā saucamās H.Cukura krimināllietas izbeigšanu. Lietā atjaunota pirmstiesas izmeklēšana.

Septembra vidū virsprokurors M.Adlers pabeidza pārbaudi par kriminālprocesa izbeigšanas likumību un pamatotību. Pārbaudē konstatēts, ka lēmums par kriminālprocesa izbeigšanu pieņemts priekšlaicīgi, pirms izmantotas visas iespējamās Kriminālprocesa likumā paredzētās izmeklēšanas un procesuālās darbības pierādījumu iegūšanā un pārbaudē, tādēļ tas atcelts.

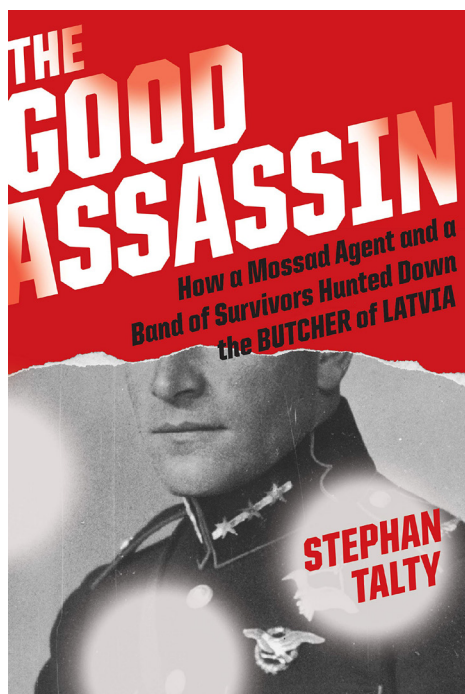
Pirmstiesas izmeklēšanu turpina cits Krimināltiesiskā departamenta Sevišķi svarīgu lietu izmeklēšanas nodaļas prokurors.

The decision of the Prosecutor's Office to annul the resolution to complete the Cukurs criminal case

that the decision to terminate the criminal process was made prematurely, without using all possible opportunities provided by law to obtain evidence. The pre-trial investigation will be continued by another Prosecutor of the special cases division of the Criminal Department.

Presently, the Council and the victims are waiting for the Prosecutor's Office decision.

***Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia,
Prepared by David Lipkin, lawyer, member of the board,
and Ilya Lensky, director of the Jews in Latvia Museum***



In January 2020, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing House in Boston, US, announced the release of *The Good Assassin: How a Mossad Agent and a Band of Survivors Hunted Down the Butcher of Latvia* by Stephan Talty.

Before World War II, Herbert Cukurs was a famous figure in Latvia. An aviator, Cukurs flew his plane to Gambia in Africa and to the Far East and other countries. He was admired by Latvian people, a real hero in his country. And then Nazis came to Latvia. Cukurs went from a beloved figure in Latvian society to an officer in an Arajs Commando unit that was responsible for the extermination of tens of thousands of Jews in Latvia and even in neighboring Russia and Belorussia. Cukurs never stood trial for his crimes, fleeing to South America after war's end and starting a successful boat rental and sightseeing business there. He was hunted down and assassinated in Uruguay in 1965.

The Good Assassin takes readers deep inside the actions of Cukurs and other members of the Arajs Commando. Author Stephan Talty describes authentically the life of Jews in Latvia before, during, and after World War II. He draws his details from many interviews of Holocaust survivors and transcripts from war crimes trials of Arajs Commando members in Hamburg, Germany, in 1976-1979.

This book is a deep and sometimes difficult narrative about this period of world history. Details of the treatment of Latvian Jews are extensive, shining a light on period of Latvian history for the world to see.

MOISEY FINKELSTEIN: LEADING RADAR SCIENTIST

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.

Finkelstein, Moisey (May 26, 1922, Odessa – December 7, 1992, Riga). He was a leading scientist in the field of radar. After graduating from high school with honors in 1939, he entered Moscow University to study physics; because of the outbreak of war, he moved to the Air Force Engineering Academy named for N. Zhukovsky, graduating in 1945. He then earned a doctorate in technical sciences and was appointed a professor in 1967. He worked as a teacher in several military schools; in 1967, he was named head of the Radar Department of the Riga Institute of Civil Aviation Engineers (RICAE). He died in December 1992, prior to a planned move to the United States to live with his son's family.



Moisey Finkelstein

Professor Finkelstein organized and directed research on radar subsurface sounding of Earth's layers using his method of synthesis of ultra-wideband video pulse signals. The importance of such work came with the needs of polar aviation: during his academic tenure, landing aircraft on ice was intuitive, made without equipment to test the strength of the ice. The methodology and equipment developed under

the guidance of Finkelstein solved this problem. Over the course of several seasons, he and his colleagues developed the measurement technique, its verification, and practical implementation in the polar ports and on the Arctic islands.

Under Finkelstein's direct leadership and with the equipment he developed for the remote measurement of the thickness of sea ice, ice reconnaissance was carried out and the optimal route was laid to Earth's North Pole for the icebreaker *Arctica* in August 1977.



The nuclear-powered icebreaker Arctica moving through the ice

Being able to measure sea ice thickness made possible extension of this method to other geological and geophysical problems.

Further development of Finkelstein's ideas and the method he devised to

synthesize ultra-wideband video pulse signals for subsurface sounding took place in the problem-solving research laboratory of aviation subsurface radar, which he organized in the mid-1970s as part of the RICAE.



Finkelstein loading equipment into a polar helicopter

In this laboratory, subsurface radar methodology used in aviation was developed and applied using unique equipment for sounding peat layers, the level of groundwater, and the depth of permafrost.

Here, under the guidance of Finkelstein, the first samples of geo-raders were created and some modifications of which (for example, the deep-ground-penetrating radar Python-02) were developed; these were used for several decades.



Books written by M. Finkelstein, which elucidate his scientific achievements

In the last years of his life, Finkelstein was engaged in the development of ground-penetrating radar for space research. Under his leadership, samples of subsurface sounding devices for the Phobos and Mars projects were created. These developments subsequently formed the basis for a new generation of ground-penetrating radar. Finkelstein had 27 inventions to his credit and was the author 150 scientific papers. Finkelstein helped about 20 young scientists receive their Ph.D.

He was awarded the State Prize of the USSR (1984), Honored Worker of Science and Technology of the Latvian SSR (1982), and was awarded the Honorary Polar Explorer badge in 1977.

By Ivar Brod

Translated by Alan Solovey

IN MEMORY OF AN OUTSTANDING PERSONALITY

Editor's Note: *At the end of November 2019, a sad message came from Riga: Professor Janis Stradinsh, the prominent Latvian scientist and great friend of the Jews of Latvia, had passed away. Our brethren in Israel prepared and published a commemorative obituary. We, JSL members in the USA, join their kind words. Below is the abridged text of the obituary.*



On November 29, 2019, academic and professor Janis Stradinsh died. He was a world-renowned scientist, an extraordinary, honorable man with a unique encyclopedic knowledge. This is a profound loss both for the Jewish community in Latvia and for us, immigrants from Latvia.

At the end of the 1980s, during the period of "Atmoda," a national renaissance, Professor Stradinsh was at the center of events in Latvia. The wave of national revival in Latvia during this period catalyzed the growth of national identity among all minorities within Latvia, especially its Jewish community. The life and history of this community were subjects of particular interest to the professor, as he highly appreciated the contribution of Latvian Jews to science and culture of the country. Indeed, more than other prominent members of the Latvian intelligentsia, he maintained a close relationship both with the Jewish community as a whole and with many of its individual members.

On October 30, 1988, he was a guest at the organizational meeting of the Latvian Jewish Culture Society. In his passionate address, the professor gave a detailed historical account of the contribution of the Jewish community to the establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1919 and its economy and culture, listing a number of its most prominent representatives. He paid special attention to the personality of his teacher, academician Solomon Hiller, the founder of the Organic Synthesis Institute. Stradinsh spoke with pain about the extermination of the Jews of Latvia in 1941-1945, recognizing the participation of Latvian people in this tragedy. He also urged his audience to remember Latvians, righteous among the nations, such as Zhanis Lipke, Professor Arturs Kruminsh, Lina Pilsroze, and others.

On July 4, 1989, Janis Stradinsh represented the Cultural Fund of the Latvian SSR at the unveiling of a memorial sign at the burning site of the Great Choral Synagogue in Riga. In discussing the memorial, the professor described the stone with a star of David carved into it not only as memorial, but also a warning ("Denkmal und Mahnmal"). He urged everyone to remember not only the innocent victims, but also those who committed these atrocities—those who burned and killed them. His prediction was correct that, over time, a memorial complex would be opened at this site.

From 1989 to 1994, he was the honorary chairman of the

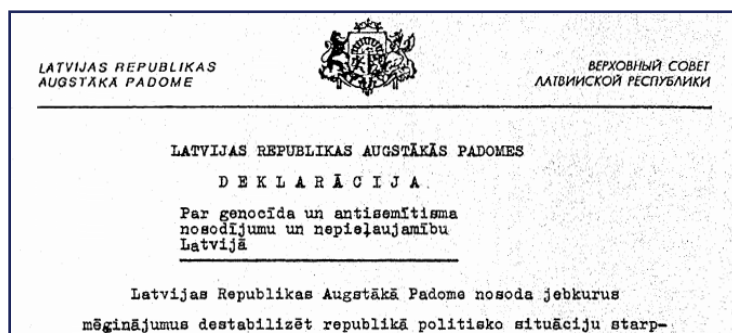
Latvia-Israel Friendship Society. In the spring of 1990, Professor Stradinsh visited Israel representing the society. He titled his speech at a ceremony at the Yad va-Shem Institute "Fill in the trenches and build bridges." As the professor said, he came to Yad va-Shem with a heavy heart and a bowed head to admit the guilt of his compatriots in the terrible crime of the 20th century. In conclusion, he expressed admiration for the achievements of Israel and ended with the phrase "And forgive us if you can."

Upon returning from Israel, Janis Stradinsh began drafting a Declaration for the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR, condemning anti-Semitism and genocide and emphasizing their unacceptability in Latvia. It was he who ultimately authored the document, which contains the words "With deep regret, we must admit that among those who helped the occupants execute the terror were Latvian citizens. There can be no justification and no statute of limitations for crimes against humanity—for the bloody genocide against the Jewish people." Writing the Declaration was already an act of civic courage, and, for the very act of writing it, he was met with considerable opposition by the communist government of Latvian SSR; but the professor managed to get a vote, and the Declaration was adopted on September 19, 1990, following an overwhelming win by 104 votes to 1, with 1 abstention.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as vice president and then president of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, despite being very busy, he was always a participant or guest at the "Jews in a Changing World" conferences, which were regularly held in Riga. It is no coincidence that the second such conference in 1997 opened with the professor's lecture titled "Jewish Intellectuals and Scientists in Latvia."

For a long time, the professor tried to memorialize Solomon Hiller by naming the Institute of Organic Synthesis after him, but to no avail. In fact, many representatives of the academic elite reproached him for his "fascination with Jews."

In conclusion, we want to emphasize that we remember not simply a historian or politician, but world-known scientist whose work in the field of electrochemistry and physical organic chemistry have a high citation index. We urge all our brethren to bow their heads in memory of this extraordinary man. May his memory be blessed.



The header of the Declaration of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, "On the Condemnation of Genocide and Anti-Semitism...", authored by Janis Stradinsh

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE



The President of Latvia, Egils Levits, is inspecting the territory of the memorial, accompanied by the director Lolita Thomsonsone

On January 15, Latvian President Egils Levits visited the Zhanis Lipke Memorial. During the visit, he met with the employees of the memorial and also talked to visiting pupils from the Riga Zolitude Gymnasium about the events of World War II, the Holocaust, and various forms of resistance of the population of the occupied territories. Together with the schoolchildren, the President visited the exposition of the memorial and listened to museum educator Maija Meiere speak about the Lipke family and the rescue of Jews from the Riga Ghetto during the war. During the discussion that followed, the schoolchildren spoke of their pride in Zhanis Lipke and other people who, at the risk of their lives, saved their fellow citizens.



At the rally in Bikernieki on January 27, 2020

On January 27, at the Bikernieki Memorial in Riga, a commemorative event dedicated to the International Holocaust Remembrance Day was held. The ceremony, organized by the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia, was attended by representatives of the diplomatic body and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, schoolchildren, and members of the Jewish community. A prayer service was held by the clergy of the main religious faiths of Latvia.

Bikernieki forest holds the largest mass grave of victims of Nazism in Latvia. From 1941 to 1944, 35,000 people were killed here, including 20,000 Jews from Latvia, Austria, Ger-

many, and Czechoslovakia, as well as opponents of the Nazi regime and Soviet prisoners of war.



Inara Murniece, Speaker of the Saeima, and Elita Gavele, Ambassador of Latvia to Israel, lay a wreath at Yad va-Shem

On January 22-23, the 5th International Forum "Remembering the Holocaust, Fighting Anti-Semitism" was held in Israel in honor of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. At the forum of 47 countries, Latvia was represented by the Speaker of the Saeima, Inara Murniece, who said in her speech, "The Holocaust taught the world: seeing an inhumane attitude, we dare not turn away and be silent. We must do everything in our power so that the lives of people will never be extinguished because of their nationality." She also emphasized that the inhabitants of Latvia have a deep sympathy for the Jewish people, "We know all too well what occupation and killing of innocent people means. We carefully preserve the memory of Latvian citizens—the saviors of Jews." The speaker added, "Holocaust remembrance and historical research for Latvia is a moral and political commitment, we insist on this both at home and in the international arena. The world today has become fragile again, so an important task now is to take care of security."

Together with political leaders from other countries, Murniece participated in a memorial ceremony at the Yad va-Shem Museum and in the laying of wreaths in the Warsaw Ghetto Square. In addition, the Speaker of the Saeima laid flowers at a tree planted in honor of the righteous man, Riga docker Zhanis Lipke, and his wife Johanna, who saved more than 50 Jews during the war.



Flowers on the tree in honor of Zhanis and Johanna Lipke

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)



On January 19, 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Edgars Rinkevichs, took part in the Ministerial Conference of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in Brussels.

In his statement, Minister Rinkevichs drew participants' attention to the fact that after Latvia had regained its independence, the country could work closely on Holocaust research, education, and remembrance, as well as officially establishing the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust. Latvia has carried out fundamental research on crimes committed against humanity by totalitarian regimes in the territory of Latvia, and the topic of the Holocaust has become an integral part of history lessons in all schools across Latvia and in study programs related to history and culture.

Regardless of the sustained efforts by the international community, especially the countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, we are aware, the minister said, that the tragic lessons of the 20th century have not been fully learnt, as we are still witnessing the denial of the Holocaust. He underlined that xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and acts of violence can be observed worldwide, as well as attempts to distort the history of World War II.

Rinkevichs stated that Latvia has firmly and consistently condemned all totalitarian ideologies, crimes against humanity, and war crimes perpetrated during World War II. As a member country of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Latvia reconfirms its full commitment to achieving the goals of the Stockholm Declaration, especially with the opening of archives related to World War II.



At the rally organized by the Israeli Embassy in honor of Holocaust Day—Israel Khurin, Marghers Vestermanis and Ambassador Orly Gil. On the signs is the inscription, "We Remember"

On January 27, in commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Israeli Embassy in Latvia organized a remarkable event "Living Memories" in the Small Aula of the University of Latvia. Students and teachers of Latvian schools met with survivors of the Riga ghetto Marghers Vestermanis and Israel Khurin and listened to their stories, the memories of these tragic pages of history, and their own experiences

in those terrible conditions. This event was organized jointly with the embassies of Sweden and Poland in Latvia, the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Latvia, the Jews in Latvia Museum, and the Zhanis Lipke Memorial. The Ambassador of Israel to Latvia, Mrs. Orly Gil, also addressed the participants at the meeting.



"We will never forget these faces"—a photo board at the Ghetto and Holocaust Museum

The Museum of Riga Ghetto and Holocaust in Latvia launched the project: We Will Never Forget These Faces. It commemorates International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The museum is regularly visited by descendants of Latvian Jews who bring photographs of their deceased relatives. To perpetuate their memory, the museum created special stands to display these photos and will continue to expand the collection. The stands carry the inscription: "We will never forget these faces" in five languages.

On January 28, Riga Secondary School #72 hosted "Bridges of Culture," a traveling exhibition on the history of the Jews of Latvia. Juliya Tereshchenko, the executive director of the museum, made a presentation to the school's nearly 200 students.



The cover of the book *City by the River*, and an advertisement for the film adaptation

On February 19, a discussion on the novel by the late Latvian writer Gunar Janowski, *City by the River*, took place at the Jews in Latvia Museum. The author, who lived after the

NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

war in exile in England, is considered one of the best Latvian prose writers. *City by the River*—one of the writer's last major works—was published in 1992 and was met with considerable interest from Latvian readers. The novel is dedicated to the Holocaust, defining it as an integral part of the history of Latvia. The novel tells the story of the expatriate Ansis, about his childhood and youth in the small Latvian town of Catharinepils (judging by the description it is Jekabpils, where the author himself lived and worked during the war), his relationship with Jews and their fate. Based on this novel, film director Viesturs Kairišs directed a film of the same name in 2020. Elina Vasilyeva, a professor at Daugavpils University, Ingrida Kupshane, an associate professor at the same university, and Zanda Gutmane, a professor at Liepaja University, took part in the discussion. Ilya Lensky, director of the museum, led the discussion.

On February 20, Arkady Sukharenko, the chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia (CJCL), met with his colleagues, the leaders of the Jewish Communities of Daugavpils, Jekabpils, Jelgava, Liepaja, Ludza, Rezekne, and Jurmala. Many leaders have taken up their positions recently; the CJCL meeting enabled them to meet with colleagues and tell them about themselves.

Sukharenko talked about how the CJCL was created and what decisions he has had to make. The Council represents all Jews and all Jewish communities in dialogue with the state and international organizations. The goal is to preserve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Over the years, commemorative signs have been installed in 210 places in Latvia where mass executions of Jews occurred. To help ensure the stable development of the Jewish community in the future, the Council started working on the creation of the Future Generations Fund, which will guarantee that the community will always have the means to meet the needs for education, social support, and other needs—even if sponsorships decrease.

Today, two priority areas have been identified in CJCL's activities: education and restitution. We are very proud that in recent years the kindergarten, "Motek," and the Shimon Dubnov secondary school are among the best, and both have more applications than space.

The Council deals with the issue of restitution—the return of Jewish properties. Five properties were previously transferred to the community, managed by the Restitution Fund. Hopefully, that number will increase in the future.

March 16 marks the 130th anniversary of the birth of the outstanding actor, director, and public figure Solomon Mikhoels (1890-1948). In Daugavpils, in the House of Unity, a musical performance will take place in honor of the great fellow countryman; in the fall (or perhaps next spring), a festival of Jewish theaters is planned. Victor Janson is directing the production. The performance uses the memories of Mikhoels



The bas-relief on the house in Daugavpils, where Solomon Mikhoels was born

himself, his brother and daughter. The main participants of the creative team were the actors of the Daugavpils Theater and local dancers, while the musicians were invited from Riga.

Solomon (Shloime) Mikhoels was born in Dinaburg (Daugavpils) and spent his childhood there. In 1905, the family moved to Riga. In Daugavpils at the house where Mikhoels was born, on March 16, 1967, a memorial plaque was installed. In 1990, when, at the suggestion of UNESCO, in a number of countries the 100th anniversary of the birth of the great director and actor was celebrated, the street on which Mikhoels's house is located was renamed in honor of the master of performance art, and the bas-relief was installed on the house, along with a new sign in three languages. The archives of the Daugavpils Local History and Art Museum contain photographs, documents, and personal belongings of Mikhoels donated by his eldest daughter Natalia Vovsi-Mikhoels (1921-2014).



At the Freedom Monument on March 16, 2020

In Riga, just like across all of Latvia, it was forbidden to hold any public events due to the coronavirus situation. Consequently, the traditional march at the Freedom Monument of former legionnaires and their supporters scheduled for March 16th did not take place. There were also no church services held. Observers noted that in the morning, more journalists and police gathered at the monument than those who came to remember the legionnaires. At the foot of the Freedom Monument is a large wreath with the emblem of the Latvian Waffen SS Legion from the Daugavas Vanagi association, which once united former SS legionnaires. Individuals arrived to lay flowers, but they did not stay there for a long time. There were significantly fewer flowers than in previous years.

Compiled by Ivar Brod
Translated by Mariya Taukule

Vice President of our JSL society, the patriarch of former ghetto and concentration camp prisoners in Liepaja (Libau), Riga and Stutthof, Professor George D. Schwab has prepared for publication his memories of the late 1930s, the Holocaust, and the postwar years in *ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR: FROM LATVIA THROUGH THE CAMPS TO THE UNITED STATES*.

Professor George D. Schwab kindly agreed to print excerpts from these memories in the *Courier*. In the current issue of the *Courier*, we begin to publish excerpts from Chapter III - "War":

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR

War! At last! How exciting, I thought. Only hours after guests had left the apartment following the usual evening of card playing, we were awakened by *swastika-emblazoned planes early Sunday morning, June 22, 1941*. They were diving out of the sky with a whistling and shrilling sound and dropping bombs all over town. Soviet anti-aircraft batteries targeted them, leaving black patches in the air as they missed their targets. Some of the planes flew so low that we could clearly see pilots waving at us as we watched from the balcony. I waved back.

The noise nearly drowned out the ringing telephone calling papa to hurry to the hospital where the wounded and dying were piling up. Relatives, friends, and patients also called and came over unannounced, seeking advice and consolation because no one knew officially until much later in the day that the Soviet Union was at war with Nazi Germany. And, it did not take me long to realize that war was not the game I used to play with Jimmy.

Between answering calls and rushing to get ready to leave for the hospital, I heard papinka (diminutive for papa) say it couldn't be war. Did not Hitler vow never to wage a two-front war? Great Britain was still far from finished. However unbelievable it might be, perhaps the Soviet Union had attacked Germany. Some who telephoned or came over after papinka had left had heard allegedly trustworthy stories that Soviet armies were at the gates of Königsberg and that Soviet bombers were over Berlin. When the news of the war was finally broadcast at midday, it was clear that the Soviet Union was officially at war and that Germany was the aggressor, despite the friendship treaty between the two countries.

Because of its strategic significance, Libau was heavily contested for one week and was in chaos. As soon as enemy planes approached and air raid sirens began to howl in the first few days and nights of air attacks, we took shelter in the building's basement. Bubinka, a deep sleeper, did not want to get out of bed at night and pleaded to be left alone, convinced that nothing would happen. I cried because I did not want to leave him behind. In any event, my parents refused to accept his pleas. Papa had originally thought that civilian targets would be spared, which did not happen. Even Aunt Yette's building in the exclusive residential Swan's Pond section of town was bombed. With air and naval attacks mounting, papa made us gather our belongings and we left

the apartment to take shelter in the basement of the city's clinic in the center of town at the *Hauptwachtplatz* (Fireman's Square). As the air and naval attacks continued to increase, papinka made us once more gather our belongings and walk to the city's main hospital that was in the woods close to the Baltic Sea, quite a distance from the town's center. There we remained in the cellar until the Germans marched into Libau. One or two days before their arrival, when it became evident that Soviet troops were being routed, there was some talk of us joining the exodus. That was not to be, for papa was told in no uncertain terms that if he were to leave his station and the city, it would be considered treason with all that that implied. Early one morning a German army command car drew up and papa, because of his fluency in German and his medical specialty, was asked to be part of the welcoming committee. On asking the German officer about policies toward Jews, papa was assured that they had nothing to worry about: all attention would be focused on defeating Bolshevism, and Jews would have to play a part in that endeavor. Satisfied with the answer, we once more gathered our belongings and walked home, hoping that the building in which we had lived still stood.

On our way the Germans did not molest us. I was struck by the large number of German horse-drawn columns and wondered about the absence of tanks and other motorized vehicles that we had heard so much about during the Polish and French campaigns. Our home was intact. Across the street was a large plot of land that had been empty until the Germans appropriated it and turned it into a parking lot for their horse-drawn carts with their German crews.

From the moment we entered the apartment, the phone began to ring and a string of visitors followed for days. As before, relatives, friends, and patients inquired about us. They relayed particularly alarming reports about Jews in small towns and villages being molested and killed and their living quarters being robbed by fellow Latvians. At first papinka thought that the reports were exaggerated, but as they mounted the rumors could no longer be ignored. I heard papa finally say that before the war, he would not have believed that fellow Latvians could stoop to the level of animals.

The assurances papinka received from the German officer soon evaporated and the unbelievable began to unfold.

Jews were prohibited from walking on sidewalks, frequenting non-Jewish stores, and mingling with non-Jews. Jews were ordered to wear yellow patches and deliver to a centrally located place valuables, including radios and bicycles. Within days, papinka was called on to identify the body of Aunt Yette's son Israel (Ljolja) Wainstain who had just been murdered, allegedly denounced by the lover of the beautiful Latvian girl he had recently married and who carried Israel's child. Papinka returned home white as a sheet. The beginning of the end had thus started for us as a family and as Jews. Papa ceased swooning over the greatness of German culture and instead reiterated that Germans and their Latvian collaborators would one day pay a hefty price for their base criminality.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, the apart-

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR (continued)

ment was searched for valuables and plundered by a stream of Germans from the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD; Security Service), *Schutzpolizei* (Schupo; Security Police), and *Kriegsmarine* (Navy)—now headquartered in the building in which we had lived before we were evicted by the Soviets. The Navy thieves arrived in a command car bearing a naval captain (also known as an inspector) whose name, I believe, was Ulmann. He was always accompanied by Latvian crews who hauled down three flights of stairs and loaded onto the waiting track much of what we had failed to hide, including antique furniture, Persian carpets, works of art, chandeliers, old Russian silver, papa's medical library, x-ray and diathermia machines and equipment, and medical instruments.

Vivid in my memory is an episode that occurred toward the end of July, just before papinka was arrested. I observed him from the dining room. He stood in the living room, a hand resting against the piano and answered the tall and lean German *Schutzpolizei* officer who had visited the apartment before and now insisted that he be shown where additional valuables were hidden. With tears in his eyes, my papinka answered that he was only a physician and what the officer saw was all that was left of a lifetime of hard work in the healing arts. The *Schutzpolizei* officer looked around once more and left. Because the Latvian currency and the Soviet ruble were considered soft currencies, people with some means hoarded gold coins and rings, diamonds, brooches, pearls, gold watches, and dollar and pound bills. Papa and mammy succeeded in hiding valuables by burying some in the barn in our backyard, in a wall safe in the apartment of a Jewish patient, and elsewhere, including the Abelits—the banker and his wife who were patients of papa.

Papinka, wearing his Red Cross armband, and Bubinka left early one morning in late July for Fireman's Square where Jewish adults were ordered to assemble for work assignments. Some distance from the square, papinka noticed the approach of the notorious green SD trucks, the vehicles that transported Jewish cargo to its destiny via the women's prison and from there to the killing grounds near the lighthouse. Motioning to the Jews to scatter, papinka was caught, horribly beaten, kicked, one eye knocked out, and thrown down the stairs into the prison's basement. We first heard of this from a Latvian patient who rushed to tell mammy. Whereas the patient claimed to have seen this happen at the prison, as did one survivor after the war who gave me her account, others claim that this beating took place openly on Fireman's Square. Whatever the venue, eyewitnesses agree that papa was in excruciating pain. He searched for his eye and pleaded to be put to death. That was not to be, at least not then. Those who claimed that the heinous crime happened on Fireman's Square saw his semi-dead body thrown onto one of the SD trucks and hauled off to prison.

The terrible news caused hysterical outbursts by mammy, something I had never seen as she was always composed and understated. I was truly alarmed and wished that Bubi

was not at work. In shock and in tears, mamma, in the coming days, left no stone unturned to obtain papa's release. For the next couple of days, she pleaded for help from his Latvian colleagues, patients, and even the SD. It was the SD murderer Erich Handke who committed the heinous crime. At last came a glimmer of hope. The criminal sadist Handke assured mammy during one of her visits that papa would be released once his injuries had healed. That did not happen: my papinka was shot dead in the vicinity of the lighthouse. (That abominable crime was a topic at the Hanover trial of Nazi war criminals in 1970.)

Incomprehensible to me was that I would never again see my papinka. Although fully aware of and frightfully concerned by what was going on, I tried to escape from it all by immersing myself in acting out war games with some of the war toys that Jimmy and I used to play with. Also, using pencils and crayons, I filled sheets of paper with war planes, warships, and tanks. I also watched the German soldiers across the street attending to their horse-drawn wagons.

Lucky for us that level-headed Bubinka was around. He, so to speak, assumed the role of *pater familias*. After the horror of papinka's murder, mammy was assigned to work as a laundress for the *Luftwaffe* (Air Force) at the naval base where Bubi also worked as an auto mechanic. Neither had any experience with either job. From time to time, mammy managed to take me along to her workstation where I helped her fold the ironed laundry.

One day after returning from work, mammy recounted an incredible encounter that had occurred there. At her workstation, she was approached by an army *Unteroffizier* (corporal). Because of mammy's Aryan complexion and profile, he told her he could arrange for her to leave for Germany where she would be absorbed into the mainstream of German society. Mammy agreed provided that she could take her sons along. That was denied and that was the end of this curious proposal.

After the initial mass murders committed by Germans with their Latvian henchmen in the summer months, a semblance of stability returned despite *chapinkes* (snatchings) here and there. Handke, *Scharführer* Karl Emil Strott—also of the SD—and a Latvian in uniform who had only nine fingers visited the apartment from time to time to look around for what was left to steal. To bribe Handke and save Bubi and me, mammy presented him with a German Leica. Strott, who was a stamp collector, helped himself to Bubi's renowned collection—something that was acclaimed at an international exhibition of known pre-Second World War Jewish collectors in Philadelphia in the early 1960s. The Latvian received a Russian Leica.

Soon mammy was transferred from her workstation to the home of Mrs. Kronberg, the Latvian mistress of the head of the SD, Wolfgang Kügler. Mammy knew her from before the war when both had frequented the same beauty parlor. Mammy became her housekeeper, which provided advan-

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR (continued)

tages, including receiving extra food that she was able to slip clandestinely to other Jews at great risk to herself. Most important, when imminent danger loomed, Mrs. Kronberg suggested that mammy take me to her upstairs apartment in the two-family house, where I was well-fed and able to spend the day in relative security watching mammy clean. Over a period of time, mammy bribed Mrs. Kronberg with all sorts of things, including a Persian runner and some silver that my parents had hidden at the Abelit home. With familiar objects surrounding me, I felt quite comfortable in the elegantly appointed apartment. I had no idea how close I was to death.

At that time we moved to a rear flat in the former Kessel villa, which was across the street from the future location of the ghetto only a few minutes from the center of town. We lived in one room, and Mrs. Kessel with her two daughters, Rosa and Mia, lived in the other room. (Mr. Kessel had been murdered.) Before long Bubi and Mia fell in love and were married by the head of the Jewish community, Mr. Zalman Israelit, and his deputy, the attorney Mr. Menash (Monia) Kaganisky, at the small Jewish Community Office that was also located on the Kessel property, which had belonged to the Kessel family before the war.

December 1941 was yet another horror-filled month. At the beginning of the month we started to hear of a serious Soviet counteroffensive in the region of Moscow. That report was followed by Hitler's declaration of war on the United States as a result of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. We were elated. The consensus among Jews was that there was no way now that Hitler could even dream of victory. But the slaughter of Jews continued. In the middle of the month, Jews were ordered not to leave their premises for two days. The meaning of this was clear: a major *Aktion* (killing) was scheduled to take place. A scramble for *Sicherheitsscheine* (security documents), officially stamped letters stating that the holder and family not be touched because of the vital work they were performing for the war effort, ensued. Mamminka secured for herself, for us, and the Kessels an awesome-looking letter with a green SD stamp and a swastika in the middle. Following the announcement, mammy immediately went to see Aunt Yette who lived in the part of the building at Swan's Pond that was still intact and worked for the Germans cleaning up the city's rubble. Mammy begged her to move in with us, which she refused to do because she did not want to leave the apartment unattended. On the days we were sequestered, a member of the SD who mammy knew came with several Latvians, inspected mammy's document, and left. Aunt Yetta became one of the thousands of Libau's Jewish victims who were rounded up, herded into the women's prison, and transported to Skede where they were forced to strip in the coldest winter on record and shot dead by Germans in the company of their Latvian accomplices. Thanks to mammy's job, we were left physically unharmed.

Following the mass slaughter, a semblance of order gradually returned, that is, working, hiding, and clandestinely

receiving news from the BBC. During that dimly freezing winter, news was more than heartening, it gave us some window to the outside world. The news about the Moscow front was embellished by *ME Agentur* (short in Yiddish for *Men Sogt Agentur*—"It is said Agency") that exaggerated or invented stories relayed orally and aimed at reinforcing the already good tidings that we would soon be liberated. But, at times *ME Agentur* spread stories to the contrary, including that we would be shot before the Soviets arrived. Strange, we now looked to be liberated by the once-hated communists.

Although much had already been stolen and hidden, we continued to be relatively warmly dressed in the bitter cold winter. Nevertheless, I developed frostbite on my little and index fingers and toes, which resulted in discoloration, swelling, and terrible itching. I, who had just turned ten, was consumed with thinking much about my war experiences and the unpleasant and repressive Soviet occupation that I would have gladly exchanged for the horrors I was now subjected to and the anxiety of not knowing what the next hour or day would have in store for me and my family.

What I could not fathom was papinka's supposed wrongdoings that led to his being murdered and why mamminka, Bubinka, and I were being punished, and I asked what everyone else did: Why does God not help us? After all, we are His people, something I failed to understand and did not think too much about. Stranger thoughts swirled in my mind. Once walking in the bitter cold on the cobblestone street near the central marketplace, I thought that maybe a Nazi victory should be welcomed for that might somehow dissolve the terrible fate that had befallen us. There would no longer be war, and everyone would live in peace once more but I would be without papinka to whom I had been very much attached. But those and similar abnormal thoughts soon perished in the face of realities on the ground. On the same day, as I continued to walk a little farther toward our apartment, I noticed in the distance walking toward me on the sidewalk the girl Veltiņa I once fancied in school. I suddenly felt embarrassed about not being permitted to walk on the sidewalk, forced to wear yellow patches, and prohibited from talking to non-Jews. As our eyes met, we both turned our faces in opposite directions. For the first time in my young life and I believe for the last time, I experienced the feeling of shame for being Jewish.

In early 1942, we were forced to move again. This time to a four-room apartment and kitchen in a small house near the *Anlagen* (park) on Alejas Street, a stone's throw from my school—for which I had no warm feelings. Mammy had a room to herself; Bubi, Mia, and I shared a room that adjoined hers; Mrs. Anna Bub had a room to herself; and Lea Beutler and Bella Blumberg the other. Of the seven, four survived the war: mammy Mia, Bella, and I.

During the day I was left at home alone while the others went to their workstations after assembling at Fireman's Square. Things were relatively quiet: no German and Latvian

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR (continued)

thieves came to the flat, perhaps realizing that most of the valuables had been stolen or hidden. While I was alone all day, I passed the time making drawings of tanks, airplanes, and warships. I hid this activity in case of a sudden intrusion. Though food was rationed, we did not starve. The barter system worked well with fellow Jews and clandestinely with Latvians and even some Germans. As previously mentioned, thanks to her work for Mrs. Kronberg, mammina contributed extra food to the larder.

In early summer of 1942, the remnants of the Jewish community, numbering a little more than 800 from the pre-war community of about 8,000, were ordered to move into a ghetto located near the center of town. It was sealed by a barbed wire fence that was patrolled by Latvian guards in black uniform. We were assigned to one room of a two-room and kitchen basement apartment on Waisenhaus (*Bāriņu* in the Latvian) Street in a building that once belonged to the Ludzin family and that faced the Kessel villa across the street on the other side of the fence. The apartment lacked a toilet, which was located at the rear entrance of the building on the main floor, a new experience for me. Mammy determined that I, straddling the border between being a child and an adult in those abnormal circumstances, should be considered a worker and arranged for me to work in the ghetto's vegetable garden whose supervisor was Mrs. Sophie Sacks. We planted seeds and grew potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, and so on. Watering the seeds and watching them sprout was a wonderful endeavor that I enjoyed immensely. It also helped me for moments not to think of the dismal troubles, which included mammina, Bubinka, and Mia falling prey to the terror and, of course, me being killed.

Although those returning from work were usually searched for smuggled food or other items, the searches were not thorough thanks to the well-bribed ghetto commandant, Franz Kerscher, who, though German, happened to be a relatively mild human being—as was his short Latvian counterpart, an elderly, white-haired man in a Latvian captain's uniform who had been assigned to the ghetto but was largely ignored by the commandant as I was soon to observe first-hand. Because of mammy's work for Kügler's mistress, she was more gently treated at the gate.

My work soon changed. Kerscher was looking for a messenger boy fluent in German. The Jewish head of the ghetto, Mr. Israelit, suggested to mammy that I accept the job and I was reassigned. My work most mornings at the commandant's headquarters situated at the ghetto's main gate included handing out tags with numbers. Every inmate had to have one when leaving the ghetto in the morning and returning it in the evening. By looking at the board on which the numbers were recorded, the commandant had an instant view of who was in and out of the ghetto. In addition, I was often ordered to fetch from and deliver to the SD and the home of the head of the SS, Dr. Fritz Dietrich, watches that were repaired in the ghetto workshop and suits and uniforms

that were made to order or had to be repaired and other objects.

Before and after occasional SD raids, arrests, and the theft of merchandise from the ghetto's grocery store by two inmates (they were arrested and executed), life was tolerable. At one of the raids, I was ordered to accompany the SD men who quizzed me about hidden valuables and simultaneously praised mammy for the excellent work she was doing for Madame Kronberg. I pleaded ignorance, which they seemed to accept, although I was vaguely aware that valuables were hidden in the ghetto but did not know where. On one occasion, I remember Mr. Israelit and Mr. Kaganski coming to see mammy for a gold coin in order to secure the release of someone who had recently been arrested but had been promised release for a fee.

During less-tense weeks and months, classes were organized by Push Weinreich, wife of one of the ghetto physicians, Dr. Weinreich, whose specialty was ear, nose, and throat. Because of my disdain for school and the work for Kerscher, I rarely attended. I tried to play with some of the kids, but was often laughed at because I did not speak Yiddish and was called *Jaecke* (a derogatory term for German Jews). With tears in my eyes, I ran to mammy to complain and was comforted when she said that she, too, did not speak Yiddish nor had papinka. They considered Yiddish a jargon, not a language. Nevertheless, I began to acquire a smattering of the spoken tongue and gradually I became acceptable to the other kids. Volleyball games were arranged as well as songfests at which recently composed morale-boosting songs and poems were sung and recited in Yiddish mocking the German hordes and their cohorts. A regular visitor to our basement continued to be Chaim Feigelman; he brought us the latest news as he had a hidden short-wave radio and was able to listen to the BBC.

Hell broke loose in September 1943. Inmates were told that the ghetto would be dissolved and the prisoners transported to a concentration camp near Riga in Kaiserwald. *ME Agency* buzzed with a million rumors. Because of her position as Mrs. Kronberg's housekeeper, mammy was perceived to be privy to inside information. She was not but that did not deter inmates from pouring into our basement quarters, anxious to have a word with her. The consensus that emerged was that we would be transported to Riga but not to be slaughtered, which could be accomplished more efficiently in nearby Skede. The BBC news in the recent past had reported additional dramatic German reverses at Stalingrad and Kursk and the bombing of German cities by American and British planes and Mussolini's Italy at bay, which inspired us and led us to believe that because of increasing German manpower shortages, Jews would be spared and gainfully used in the war effort.

On this optimistic note, we readied ourselves for the trip. Clothing was repaired, cleaned, and ironed, and gold coins and diamonds were ingeniously sewn into coats, jackets, brassieres, and corsets. Off we marched with suitcases and

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR (continued)

hand luggage containing food and other necessities to the Libau rail cargo (*Güterbahnhof*) station where, in the afternoon only hours before the beginning of Yom Kippur in October 1943, we were chased onto cattle cars. Never having been in one, I was shocked by the lack of sanitary facilities; in the overcrowded space we set aside a corner to attend to our biological needs in a bucket that was not emptied during the trip. The stench in the poorly ventilated cattle car was beyond description.

To minimize the smell and the terrible discomfort of being squeezed like sardines in a tin, I consoled myself with the fact that I was safe with mammuly, Bubinka, and Mia nearby, and I soon began to daydream of my fabulous days in Riga: the trolley cars and buses, the zoo, the smoke-filled Café Otto Schwarz, Aunt Hermine's and Aunt Tanja's stunningly appointed apartments, the drives with Betty Schalit, the Lido at the Riga beach, and playing with wild cousin Joni.

I awakened from a brief nap just before the train stopped and the doors were opened in the early morning. We were welcomed by barking German shepherds, SS men with rifles, and others in strange-looking zebra-like uniforms shouting "Out!" "Out!" "Pigs!" "Miserable Jewish creatures!" This must be a mistake, I thought. As we were shoved out of the cattle cars, we were beaten with truncheons, whips, and the butts of rifles and were forced to run with our luggage toward a nearby huge and strange-looking square with curious looking constructs called "barracks" that I had not seen before. The entire complex was surrounded by barbed wire, similar to the Libau ghetto. We were ordered to throw all our belongings onto a large pile of suitcases and hand luggage and were told that we could retrieve our belongings shortly. Mammy, Bubi, and Mia were reluctant to do so, but I urged them to comply because of the promise made. There was no further discussion as the decision was made for us by the assaults carried out by the Germans in the company of their zebra-dressed cohorts, non-Jews who were incarcerated, as I soon found out, for criminal and other kinds of activities.

Relieved of our luggage, we were herded like animals into a large barrack. The men were soon separated from the women and led to showers where we were ordered to undress, leave our clothing and shoes neatly behind in a pile, which, we were told, we could retrieve after the shower. This was not to be. Instead, we were issued used garments and clogs that did not fit, making most of us look like clowns. We even managed to laugh at one another. Bubi and I were assigned to one of the barracks that easily had more than a hundred bunk beds with straw mattresses and straw pillows that pricked the body and thin, dark-gray blankets. The barrack had no bathtubs or showers. Several long sinks with cold water pipes and numerous handles situated diagonally across from our barrack served as the men's washroom. The toilet in the rear of our barrack consisted of an open cesspool surrounded by wooden planks. No water. No paper. Plenty of chlorine. Indescribably filthy, smelly, and very, very cold, es-

pecially at night. That the pampered me did not fall into the pit and drown is one of the miracles of the war. It was also in Kaiserwald where for the first time I became acquainted with the eggs of lice and the hatched offspring. The lice roamed all over the body, especially in the hairy parts to which I did not yet have a claim except on my head, and in the seams of clothing. Delousing consisted of catching the crawling lice, which was not difficult, and crunching them to death between the fingernails of our thumbs. The eggs met the same fate.

However difficult the conditions were, no matter where we were incarcerated, the religious among us usually managed to find a corner in our quarters where they prayed to and pleaded with God for relief. But to no avail. Not having been brought up in a religious home, I neither understood the Hebrew language nor the meaning of the prayers. Nevertheless, I shared with everyone the intense hope that He would soon respond to our pleas.

Appell, or roll call, too, was something new. Mornings and evenings we had to line up in front of our barracks for head counts. We were now known by numbers and no longer by first and last names. To appear as tall as possible and thus hopefully not be selected for being useless and shipped off to the killing grounds, I tried to avoid the front row and built with my clogs a sandbar on which I stood on my toes as the SS man approached—usually accompanied by one of the sadistic non-Jewish inmates known as Kapos. Those mostly criminal inmates ranked above the Jewish prisoners and were treated more mildly by the SS. More often than not, they were considerably more sadistic than their SS masters. One German criminal in particular stood out. Tall and strikingly handsome, he was known in the camp as "Mr. X." His good looks were only surpassed by his brutality.

The women's camp adjoined ours and was separated by a barbed wire fence. Oral contact was easy, and over my protestation mammy threw across the fence a part of her ration of the usually foul, stale, and moldy bread. In addition, our morning and evening rations consisted of a little substitute jam, sometimes accompanied by a little brown sugar or margarine and watery coffee and watery soup with sandy turnips or cabbage at midday. To make sure that I got a little of the more solid soup that was at the bottom of the pot, I tried to place myself as often as possible toward the end of the line. As noted, in the evening, the morning menu reappeared. The inedible food was a prescription for diarrhea, which was widespread.

Only a few days after our arrival at Kaiserwald, Bubi was alleged to have been selected and taken to a *Kasernierung* (work camp) in the city run by the German *Reichsbahn* (Germany's railroad system). Fearful to leave me in the camp alone during the day, mammy somehow arranged that I be assigned to her work battalion, called *Tanklager*; she worked in an oil depot terminal in Riga. We left on foot early in the morning and returned in the evening. On the marches to and

ODYSSEY OF A CHILD SURVIVOR – WAR (continued)

from work, we were often ordered to sing. The Yiddish songs we sang spoofed the German murderers and their local accomplices. The songs were morale boosters that reflected our conviction that Nazi Germany and its allies were about to lose the war. The question was how best to maneuver in the interim in order to survive so that we could be witnesses, take revenge, and tell the world of the true meaning of German *Kultur*.

At the oil depot, mammy and I, among many others, were assigned to shovel sand onto wheelbarrows and push them to their destination. Doing so in our starved and emaciated state in the bitter cold was frightfully difficult. From time to time, we were permitted to go to a nearby shack where the slave laborers were able to slice a potato that prisoners managed to *organize* (the code word for appropriate) and fry against the stove to quell hunger pangs, help stop the chronic diarrhea, and keep our bodies warm for ten minutes.

From early childhood, I had suffered from inflammation of my tonsils and appendicitis. Although my tonsils had been removed by Dr. Mintz in Riga shortly before the Soviet occupation, the slated operation to remove my appendix was made impossible by the German occupation. While slaving at the oil depot, I had an attack and Dr. Max Sick, a surgeon from Libau (nicknamed Homen), who had become a camp physician, admitted me to a so-called camp infirmary that was in the rear of my barracks; I was able to rest there for several days. On hearing of a forthcoming inspection, he asked me to vanish from the infirmary, which I did, and was able to rejoin the oil depot work battalion.

News reached the camp that the *Reichsbahn* satellite camp was tolerable and that the camp's commandant, a German railway functionary, possessed human qualities. From time to time, a *Reichsbahn* truck arrived at the camp with requests for specific inmates, and mammy received news from Bubi and a request that she do everything possible to enable us to join him. A gift for the commandant would facilitate matters, he suggested. Mammy was able to sneak out a note to Bubi who managed to get it to Mr. Abelit in Libau. He honored mammy's request that one of her fur coats be sent to the commandant for his wife. To make sure that I would get to Bubi, I was left behind in the camp and had to wait about a week for the truck to arrive. Mammy, unfortunately, was unable to join me and was at the oil terminal when I left Kaiserwald with the help of a patient of papa's—Hinda Foss, who was well-regarded by the SS establishment in Libau and Kaiserwald. She pushed me into the truck.

For the days I remained waiting in Kaiserwald, I was assigned to shovel snow in front of the commandant's headquarters. One day the commandant, SS *Sturmabfuhrer* Albert Sauer, came out and walked toward me and said that he did not like the way I was performing my duty. He slapped my face so hard that I fell in the snow and almost lost consciousness. Fellow prisoners managed to bring me to the camp's infirmary where Dr. Sick attended to me and released

me the same day.

Indeed, the *Reichsbahn* work camp was considerably better than Kaiserwald. The food and sanitary conditions were better. That translated into a lukewarm shower in a common shower quarter once a week, fewer eggs of lice and their offspring, beatings less frequent, bunk beds, and warmer barracks.

I slept peacefully across from Bubi. We had news that mammy had succeeded in getting out of Kaiserwald and was now in a work camp called SS *Gaertnerei* (SS Nursery Garden). Mia, too, was in a work camp. The news from the world that continued to seep in was most encouraging: German and Axis armies continued to be repulsed on all fronts, and German cities were being mercilessly bombed by the British and Americans. All in all, morale was high. Were I to be killed, I thought, at least I would die convinced that Germany's demise was assured. But the imminence of Germany's projected defeat intensified my desire to survive, and the all-consuming issue was how best to maneuver to stay alive. If only we could hold out, we would welcome to Riga the once-detested Soviet armies with open arms.

Like Bubi, I declared my specialty to be electricity, and, as an electrician I was assigned to his workstation in one of the huge railroad hangars where battery-powered railroad cars were being overhauled. Bubi's expertise, in my view, was awesome, and I usually assisted him by charging batteries, changing fuses and light bulbs, and checking and often replacing worn-out wiring, among other such chores. Whenever a German SS man would appear, we were alerted by an inmate shouting "*schischo*," which stood for six, I believe, and resonated well in the acoustically solid hangar.

At the *Reichsbahn*, I had another appendix attack and was taken to the camp's so-called infirmary. The doctor, a Lithuanian Jew who claimed to have known papa, treated me gently and applied warm compresses to the painful area and confined me to the infirmary for several days in June 1944 until the pains were gone.

In July to early August 1944, not long after the unsuccessful attempt to kill Hitler failed, there was a commotion. Shortly after returning from work, all hell broke loose. Out! Out! (*Appell! Appell!*) Chased into a barrack outside the camp by unfamiliar SS guards who had just arrived, men were separated from women and ordered to undress, line up, and one by one pass inspection by *Reichsbahn* Commandant Köhler, the SS physician of Kaiserwald, Dr. Eduard Krebsbach, and his medical aide, SS *Oberscharfuhrer* Heinz Günther Wisner. While the three were talking, joking, and laughing, Wisner mainly ordered inmates to go right or left. As we approached the troika, Bubi and I were certain that Köhler would see to it that no harm came to us in anticipation of receiving additional bribes. That was not to be: Bubi and I were separated. I was ordered to the right and Bubi to the left.

By George David Schwab
Continued in the next issue.