



# The Latvian Jewish Courier

## MEETINGS IN MEMORY OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMS HELD IN LATVIA ON JULY 4



*President of Latvia Raimonds Vejonis speaks at the rally*

More than a quarter century ago (October 3, 1990), the Supreme Council of Latvia declared the 4th of July a day of mourning; July 4 is considered to be the beginning of the mass extermination of Latvian Jews. At that time, the Supreme Council had already declared the restoration of independence, but Latvia was still a de facto member state of the U.S.S.R. On July 4, 1941, the special forces of the Third Reich began pogroms in Riga with the direct involvement of local Nazi collaborators.

A rally organized by the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia took place in Riga at the monument to the torched Choral Synagogue on 25 Gogol Street. President Raimonds Vejonis, Speaker of the Saeima Inara Murniece, Prime Minister Krishyanis Karins, Defense Minister Artis Pabriks and other government officials, as well as diplomats including Israeli Ambassador Lironne Bar-Sadeh, participated in the commemoration ceremony.

In his speech, President Vejonis recalled that in the fires of the Holocaust, Latvia had lost generations of citizens who would have made significant contributions to the future of the country. "We are here today to commemorate the people of Latvia who died in the Holocaust and to express our sympathy to the Jewish community of Latvia and to the entire Jewish people." Let us remember that it was in this place

on July 4, 1941, that the burning of the synagogues began, that the terrible events of the Holocaust in Latvia took place—by the hands of the so-called Arajs Kommando killing almost 26,000 Latvian citizens." We will not forget another historical fact, however. In Latvia, there were also people who showed the highest human qualities in this tragedy by saving their Jewish fellow citizens. Their names are forever preserved next to the name of Janis Lipke on the monument erected on the ruins of the synagogue. Thanks to Margers Vestermanis, we now know that there were almost 700 such Jewish rescuers in Latvia.

The Speaker of the Saeima, Inara Murniece, called upon politicians in the 21st century to preserve the eternal memory of the victims of the Holocaust and to do everything possible to ensure their lives were never erased from history because of their ethnicity. We bow our heads to innocent victims and pass that memory on to the next generations. It is important that the younger generations know the significance of these issues and understand why the elderly and the middle generations remember it with tears in their eyes. During the Second World War, more than 70,000 Jews were killed on Latvian soil because of their ethnicity.

Margers Vestermanis, a former prisoner of the Riga ghetto, and founder of the Jewish Museum in Latvia, reminded the audience how 30 years ago the first event dedicated to the genocide of the Jewish people in Latvia took place on this site. At that time, there was no monument and few knew that the bones of burned people were buried under the grass and flowers. Today, on every July 4, the first persons of the state stand next to us. Margers Vestermanis asked a question that we have yet to answer: How could it be that only a hint from the Nazis was enough for their local accomplices to go to kill and rob, mock, and then to claim the property of the Jews? He called upon those present to make lists of names not just of the righteous

**Our next Memorial/Yizkor will take place on Sunday, November 17, 2019, at 12:00 Noon in Park East Synagogue, 163 East 67th Street, New York.**

**Guest Speaker: Mr. Gideon Taylor, Chair of Operations World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO).**

**Guest Cantor: Joseph Malovany, Fifth Avenue Synagogue.**

**MEETINGS IN MEMORY OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMS HELD IN LATVIA ON JULY 4 (continued)**

and saviors of the Jews, but also of the executioners. It's not just Viktor Arais—the name of every killer must be recorded.

Israeli Ambassador Lironne Bar-Sadeh said: "Today is a quiet testament to almost a hundred thousand Jews who were killed for no crime. Just because they're Jewish. We must speak of the shocking and unimaginable suffering of the Jews in those terrible years and glorify the few brave people of Latvia who, despite the circumstances, saved their neighbors."

Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, Deputy Chairman of the CJCL Dmitry Krupnikov, and Riga Synagogue Rabbi Eliohtu Krumer also addressed the audience. The rally was led by Ruvin Ferber, a professor at the University of Latvia.

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On the morning of July 4, the Shamir Society and the Riga Ghetto and Holocaust Museum in Latvia organized a traditional commemorative march (Steps of Life) in memory of the victims of the genocide of the Jewish people. The procession began at 10:00 on the corner of Lomonosov and Ebrey streets; after the welcoming speeches, the participants marched through the territory of the former Riga Ghetto to the memorial of the Great Choral Synagogue on Gogol Street.

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The rally in Daugavpils at the Mezchciems memorial

as others, spoke. The memorial prayer was read by the oldest member of the local Jewish community, Samuel Gleserov, who recently celebrated his centenary. Leaders of the Russian and Belarusian communities took part in the rally. The pupils of the theater group performed a musical and poetic composition dedicated to the Holocaust. The rally ended with a minute of silence and the laying flowers.



Chairman Janis Vilnitis lays flowers at the monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Škēde, Liepaja

**Liepaja.** A rally in memory of the victims of the genocide of the Jewish people was held at the memorial in Skede, where 3,640 Jews, including 1,048 children, were killed in 1941-45. Representatives of the Jewish community of Liepaja and other Liepaja residents gathered here. According to the 1935 census, 7,379 Jews lived in Liepaja, the vast majority of whom were killed. In Skede, 2,731 Jews were killed on December 14-16, 1941, alone.

**Rezekne.** About 40 people took part in the rally near the monument at the Jewish cemetery. Mayor A. Bartashevich, Deputy Mayor A. Reshetnikov, Executive Director R. Alekhno, rescuer V. Rasnacha, chairman of the Jewish community L. Sukhobokov, and ex-chairman R. Kukla spoke. A student of the music school sang a song of mourning, and L. Sheinker read a memorable prayer. The previous day, L. Sukhobokov visited locations associated with the Holocaust and laid flowers there.

On July 4, remembrance rallies were held in many Latvian cities.

**By Bronya Shif**

**Translated by Eva Minkin**



Laying flowers on July 4 at the site of the execution of Jews in Viliani. The journalist Iveta Dimzule who took this picture called it, "In a moment of silence, the heavens wept"

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**Daugavpils.** A rally in memory of the victims of the genocide of the Jewish people took place at the Brother's Cemetery memorial in Mezchciems, where the remains of Jews brutally killed in the Pogulianka forest of Daugavpils in 1941-42 were reburied in the summer of 1989. About 100 people gathered for the rally. The mayor of the city, A. Elksnins, the chairman of the Jewish community, H. Sperling, the former chairman, A. Fishil, as well

## RIGA JEWISH SCHOOL CELEBRATES 30 YEAR ANNIVERSARY



*Riga Jewish School*

On July 28 of this year, a remarkable event took place in the Jewish community of Latvia—it celebrated 30 years of operation of the Riga Jewish School (RJS).

First, a short history.

The idea of recreating a Jewish school in Riga was born in 1988, as the U.S.S.R. collapsed. During this period, after many years of silence and rejection, a range of problems of Jewish culture in general began to be openly discussed. In the same year came the first meeting of graduates of a few of Riga's Jewish gymnasiums—all had graduated before World War II. The meeting was attended by more than 150 graduates, already quite old, who recalled their youth and those who remained forever young, having died during the war.

At this meeting, thoughts were expressed about the upbringing of the younger generation, about Jewish identity, about the need for its development and preservation. On September 10, 1988, the first Latvian Society of Jewish Culture meeting was held, with attendance of more than 1,000. At this meeting was raised the idea of establishing a Jewish school in Riga. An educational center was created headed by Hone Bregman, a history teacher since 1948 and former director of one of the government schools in Riga. On September 1, 1989, after many years of the close of all Jewish education institutions



*Hone Bregman, the school's first principal, on the school's opening day on September 1, 1989*

in Latvia, with support from the Latvian government, the new Jewish school, initially named "School in the Yard," opened in a building on 29th Dzirnau Street. The school was the first Jewish school on vast territory of former U.S.S.R., the first and only government Jewish school in Latvia, and also the first national school in Latvia. Since September 1, 2010, Riga Jewish School (RJS) has been operating on 62 Miera Street. The name of the street where the school is located means "street of peace."

For almost a quarter of a century, the name of Shimon Dubnov, historian, publicist, who chose to remain with his people and die with them in the bloody massacre in one of the first punitive operations in the Riga ghetto, has been honored. This man, as he was taken to his death, shouted to the rest of his people: "Jews! Write it down, write it down!" His memory lives on in RJS—his name is inscribed over the school's entrance. If we believe that the name given to a person, ship, or building leaves an imprint on their destiny, then the fate of RJS is closely tied to the great power of education and the students' awareness of themselves as part of the Jewish people.



*Participants of the legendary KINNOR, along with founders and leaders Michael and Fannie Leinwand, performed in a festive concert*

Today, RJS, under leadership of its Principal Karina Brikmane, who has been with the school from its inception, has 42 teachers and 340 students; the number of pupils has been steadily growing in recent years. In addition to teaching general education subjects and following the standard state program, the school pays great attention to Jewish education—both formal and informal. The curriculum includes Hebrew lessons (taught by native speakers), Jewish tradition and Judaica, and Jewish history. Russian, Latvian, and English are also part of the curriculum.

The school maintains close contact with Israel, recruiting its Hebrew language teachers from that country. Students learn Hebrew from interactive materials using special computer training programs, laptops, and interactive boards.

The school is also actively cooperating with World ORT (Organization for Educational Resources and Technological Training), which helps schools around the world with technology

## RIGA JEWISH SCHOOL CELEBRATES 30 YEAR ANNIVERSARY (continued)



*The festively decorated school entrance*

A wide range of activities is offered to the students: dance and vocal ensembles, painting and Jewish history theater studios, web design and rhythm classes. Very popular among the students are chess, ping-pong, robotics, and a math and English language discussion club. High school students gather for meetings at the Club of Interesting Meetings and the Club Judaica. The school cafeteria provides students and teachers with kosher meals; security personnel are on duty 24/7. Additional help from a physiologist, a speech therapist and a social worker is always available. Buses transport students to and from home.

Students also participate in overnight Shabatons, organized for them in summer and winter camps.

Kids (4-6 years old) who are just preparing for admittance into RJS have an opportunity to attend Motek, the pre-school program.

The school traditionally celebrates all Jewish holidays—often parents are invited.

The spirit here is of one big family. Students are bound by friendship between classmates, between students in the senior and junior grades, visit each other at home, and attend various outside activities.

RJS students get an excellent education, giving them a leg up in the job market. RSJ graduates are journalists, doctors, programmers, entrepreneurs, etc. They work in Latvia and all over the world.

RSJ boasts a team of excellent teachers headed by Principal Karina Brikmane. Among them: math teacher Dr. Elina Falkenshtein, Jewish history and traditions teacher Ester Andreeva, and Hebrew teacher Mila Fridman.

The school is an important center of Jewish life in Latvia, allowing children to learn and develop in a Jewish environment, helping to preserve their culture and identity.

The 30th anniversary celebration was attended by: Arkady Suharenko, Chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia; Lironne Bar-Sadeh, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Israel in Latvia; Oleg Burov, Mayor

and organizes projects and competitions related to science, design, various inventions, and start-ups. Students participate in virtual lessons in mathematics and physics, competing with and at the same time communicating with students at other schools in the ORT network. Over the past two years, high school students at the Riga Jewish School have won prizes in the World ORT Young Entrepreneurship Program.

of the Riga City Council; Roman Alyev, Chairman of the Advisory Council for National Minorities of the Republic of Latvia; and World ORT representative Alexander Ferdman, Latvia.

Oleg Burov awarded honorary diplomas to Principal Brikmane and to Chairman Suharenko.

The highlight of celebration was the festive concert. One of the participants—KINNOR, a choir organized in 1988 by Michael and Fannie Leinwand. The couple traveled from Israel to take part in school's anniversary celebration. Alumnae came from all over the world; one of them—Karina Oganessian—is a well-known, world-class opera singer in La Scala, Italy. EILAT, a dance group led by Elena Gorelik that has been an inseparable part of Latvian Jewish community for over 25 years, performed at the concert. A duet of a future student with her mother, who is also an alumna of RJS, was also performed.



*School principal Karina Brikmane was congratulated by Arkady Sukharenko, Chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia, and Oleg Burov, Mayor of Riga*

The 30-year anniversary celebration was a great success thanks to the team of school executives, teachers, staff, parents, and volunteers.

The Riga Jewish School was, is, and will be the warm home where children can receive an unparalleled education—one that gives them the opportunity to live a full and creative life and offers them an understanding of their purpose and respect for their country and people.

Remembering our history, without which there is no future, we bow our heads before those who died in all wars, we rejoice for all those who are close and understand the idea of Jewish education, which has existed for centuries and gave us the proud name of "People of the Book." **By Semyon Gizunterman**



*School personnel greeting guests and students during the celebration*

## IN MEMORIAM GERTA FEIGIN

(NOVEMBER 25, 1928 – APRIL 7, 2019)



*With great sorrow we inform of the recent passing of a very dear friend of all of us, an active member of Board of JSL since the very creation of our organization. We published Gerta's biography in the previous Courier issue as an article devoted to her 90th anniversary,*

*but we repeat one of details here: her signature, as the director of the New York branch of the Claims Conference, was on more than 200,000 payment documents for Holocaust survivors. We miss you, dear Gerta. May your memory be blessed.*

*The following are Gerta's granddaughter Anna's parting words.*

Gerta Feigin was my wonderful, kind, and wise grandmother. I am grateful that I am her granddaughter. I have had the great pleasure and luck of spending 20 years of my life with her. My grandmother was my closest friend and confidante. When I grew older, she became my mentor. I have always felt understood by her and it is not surprising as she was keenly intelligent and perceptive. Every time I recall a memory of her, I always write it down.

### My Memories:

We always had moments where we would make eye contact when something weird or funny happened. We used to travel around Manhattan by public transportation. We frequently took the M104 bus. She would usually sit and I would stand and hold the railing. Even when we would be silent, we would start winking at each other and making silly faces. This made us start laughing. People in the bus would smile at us and say: "Is that your granddaughter/grandmother?" The connection between us was always present.

My next memory is short and sweet. When my grandmother became older and needed to take naps more frequently, she adored doing it with me being next to her. She would always put her arm around me and hug me close. You would not believe how fast she fell asleep.

This memory I am sharing with you is one I will never forget. We lived very close to each other, in fact, we lived across the street. On my way to elementary school, I used to pass my grandmother's building and she would wave to me from her window. My grandmother would wake up early in the morning just to do that. I guess she wanted to start the day together with me and I felt the same. That



Gerta and her granddaughter Anna



Gerta Feigin

was an unforgettable ritual. I felt so much love for her and it was reciprocated tenfold.

This summer I traveled to the Baltic (Riga and Vilnius), a place where my grandmother was born and spent her delightful childhood. I had traveled to Riga before with my grandmother but I was a young child of about 10 at the time.

Now I have been able

to visit as an adult of 20. When I first stepped into Riga, I put a hand onto my heart and thought to myself: "We made it, Bababa" (Bababa was one of my many special nicknames for my grandmother). We visited "the Jewish Riga," Rumbula, the Jewish Ghetto Museum, and other significant places that were meaningful to the Jews of Riga, and, of course, to my grandmother. As I am writing this, I am realizing that we visited Rumbula on July 7, which is exactly three months after my grandmother passed away. My grandmother's heart belonged to the Riga Jews, to their incomprehensible tragic past. She often told me stories about life in pre-war Riga. And, of course, talked about the Holocaust; about what had happened to her family members who had perished. It gave her great joy to be involved in the Jewish Community of Riga until the very end of her life. Because of her dedication and involvement in Jewish Riga life, being in that physical space touched greatly my heart.

I would also like to include a fragment of what I had written to be read at my grandmother's funeral:

*Babulia,*

*I will never forget the moments we had together. I will miss taking naps with you and feeling your arm hug me close. You took care of me when I was sick and never left my side. You are the most kind, intelligent, and honest person I know. You have brought me so much happiness and I thank you so much for that. I am so lucky. My happiest memories of us are when I would come over to your house to spend time with you. You fed me, we talked, and we were happy. I would bring you your favorite glass of cranberry juice and then go do the dishes. These simple times are the ones that have brought me the most joy.*

*I wish I could give you a phone call as I always do and ask you how your day was. There are so many things I wish to say to you, but I will leave that for another time.*

*I miss you forever. I love you, forever.*

*As always—Byechiki—Love, Anichka*

**By Anna Rishik**

## ABOUT RESTITUTION—AGAIN AND AGAIN



Restitution... Return of looted properties... Compensation... JUST... Terezin Declaration...

So many expressions, so much time wasted (or not), so many recommendations, decisions, requests...

And all of this bore wonderful fruit: FIVE properties squeezed out of extremely unwilling... who? Latvian Saeima? Latvian government? Society in general?

Well, at least some interesting signals came from Riga, indicating that maybe, just maybe, some positive actions might take place.

Interestingly enough, but middle-aged Saeima deputies seemed to begin accepting the idea that some (really?! Just some?!) injustices have, in fact, taken place during both occupations and, yes, Latvians do have to take some, at least moral, responsibility for what happened. As a result, they suggested that the Saeima should start working on a resolution to compensate in a monetary manner—possibly allocating 40 million euros payable from 2021 through 2030, in annual installments in 4 million per year.

A very interesting question: If all this time there were talks about restitution—returning real estate properties that used to belong to Jewish organizations or persons in prewar Latvia, then where did those ideas about monetary compensation come from?

Here is what took place and the reasoning behind the current situation. The cadastral value of those properties was determined to be around 48 million euros. And because the rightful owners or their heirs are either dead or cannot be found, properties are now owned by other persons or organizations. To take those properties away from current owners wouldn't right any past wrongs but would hurt many innocent people.

Therefore representatives from the group Development/For! in the Saeima introduced an initiative called "Good will indemnification." The main idea was to offer some sort of monetary reparations rather than restoring the property to those from whom it was stolen or their descendants.

In response to this initiative, the Council of Latvian Jewish Communities expressed their gratitude for such action. According to Dmitry Krupnikov, Chairman of Restitution Fund of the Council, this initiative, which could lead to a solution of the restitution issue, carries a moral meaning that is priceless for the Jewish community. This initiative, should it become law, might finally close this chapter of unacceptable injustice—especially since similar initiatives, in accordance with Terezin Declaration, have been approved and implemented in most European countries, including Lithuania and Estonia.

The issue of compensation for losses experienced by the Latvian Jewish community has been widely discussed within Latvia for many years; Jewish leaders have always stressed that Latvia as a state and the Latvian people in whole should never be held responsible for Holocaust crimes because Latvia was

occupied and could not protect its inhabitants regardless of their nationality/ethnicity. However, some nationalistically oriented politicians and Latvian media commentators again began saying that it is absolutely unacceptable to consider Holocaust victims as a special group.

The U.S. State Department, according to the U.S. Congress Bill 447, The Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST), must report by the end of the year to the president any progress with restitution. In mid-June, Director of International Affairs of World Jewish Restitution Organisation (WJRO), Evan Hochberg, and U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, Thomas Yazdgerdi, met with Latvian officials in Riga to urge passage of the restitution legislation. Also, WJRO continues to work closely with the Latvian Council of Jewish communities on this issue.

At this time, the initiative failed to pass through to be accepted for further discussion by the Saeima. There was an equal number of supporters and of those who believed that this initiative should not be discussed during this Saeima session. Right now, the group that introduced the proposal has decided to recall it and postpone discussion until the next Saeima session.

We will monitor this situation closely.

As I used to mention in my past comments regarding the issue of restitution, I, in my own right, am not overly optimistic.

This issue has dragged on for far too long—and is still at the spot it began. They coughed over five sorry properties, most of which are practically unusable, and consider that this is completely sufficient. Based on what is being discussed on social media, a lot of Latvians fiercely oppose giving more than 40 million euros to Jews.

So we shall see.

Latvijas Republikas Saeimas  
2019. gada 20. jūnija  
kārtējās sēdes darba kārtība 09:00  
1. Par iesniegtajiem likumprojektiem

4. Likumprojekts  
**Par labas gribas atlīdzinājumu Latvijas ebreju kopienai par holokausta un komunistiskā totalitārā režīma laikā nelikumīgi atsavināto nekustamo īpašumu**  
(346/Lp13) **Atsauks**

*Extract from the agenda of the Latvian Saeima, Resolution: Withdrawn (translated from Latvian)*

**By Yefim Shteinfeld**

### Editor's Note:

On Thursday, July 11, recently appointed Latvian Prime Minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš met with representatives of World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and other Jewish organizations (American Jewish Committee, B'nai B'rith International, and several others) in New York to discuss legislation introduced into the Latvian Saeima in June to address outstanding Holocaust property claims. The prime minister expressed his support for the legislation, and, indeed, his party expressed support of the legislation in June and voted in favor of the legislation in a preliminary vote. Those present welcomed the prime minister's support for the legislation.



## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE



On May 14, a general meeting of the Riga Jewish community was held; 54 delegates took part. Community leaders presented a report about activities in the social

center Hesed, the community center JCC Riga, and the Jews in Latvia Museum. Other areas reported on include preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, the development of the activities of the kindergarten Motek, and the Shimon Dubnov Jewish Secondary School.

As the community grows and develops, new resources are required to manage its activities; a decision was made to expand the board of directors. The head of the Riga Jewish Community Arkady Sukharenko and his deputies Benjamin Kajem and Dmitry Krupnikov were reelected. Two new members were elected to the board: David Lipkin and Renat Lokomet. Gita Umanovskaya is the executive director of the Riga Jewish School.



*President Vejonis presents the award to Rabbi Mordechai Glazman*

Rabbi Mordechai Glazman received a memorable gift from the President of the Republic of Latvia Raymond Vejonis for his many years of work benefiting the Jewish community of Latvia. Rabbi Glazman and his family came to Riga from New York at the direction of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1992 and founded the Chabad-Lubavich Center in Latvia. The Chabad-Lubavich organization has since made great contributions to the development of Jewish life in Latvia. Thanks to the efforts of Rabbi Glazman and his family, members of the Jewish community have been able to learn more about Jewish traditions and the observance of the commandments. Throughout the years Rabbi Glazman has been paying great attention to education—there is an active kindergarten and a school—and charity.

Congratulations to the distinguished Rabbi on the award!



*President of Latvia Egils Levits*

On July 8, the Riga Castle acquired a new tenant—Egils Levits officially became the President of Latvia. It is still too early to judge about the future actions of the new president. We only note that Levits is the co-author of the Preamble to the Constitution of Latvia. In Levits's view, national minorities should show loyalty not through adherence to laws only, but through a "desire to assimilate." Levits opposes the restitution of Jewish communal property seized during the war or confiscated by the Latvian State. It should be noted, however, that the restitution of Jewish communal property is included in the cooperation agreement of the parties of the ruling coalition.

On June 19, 2019, in New York, the United Nations celebrated 70 years since Israel became a member. At the solemn reception dedicated to this event, the Ambassador of Latvia Andrejs Pildegovichs spoke on behalf of many other ambassadors to the UN. He stated: "I am pleased to note that Latvian Jews have contributed to the creation and consolidation of Israel, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel—Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook of Bauska,



*Ambassador Pildegovichs speaks at a UN session in honor of the 70th anniversary of Israel's admission to this organization*

## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

Latvia, was just one of them.” He continued: “Our best people—Latvians and Jews—both perished in Stutthof, Gulags of Siberia and the Riga Ghetto, they died in the battles of World War I and World War II, many fled into exile.” At the end of his speech, Ambassador Pildegovichs said that “combating racial, ethnic and religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism, has been one of the Latvian Government’s top priorities in the human rights area since regaining independence.”

Exactly a week later, on June 26, 2019, Ambassador Pildegovichs spoke at the informal session of the UN General Assembly devoted to the fight against anti-Semitism. In his speech, he stated, among other things: “...Latvian Government has placed increased attention on the investigation of hate or racially motivated crimes. We have been working on awareness-raising campaigns in cooperation with NGOs, as well on including the topic of anti-Semitism in the school curricula.”

The conference “Art and the Holocaust: Reflections for the Common Future” took place on July 2-3, 2019, in the Riga Jewish community, organized by the community and the Jews in Latvia Museum in cooperation with Roman Suta and Aleksandra Belcova Museum (a branch of the Latvian National Art Museum) and the Association of the History Teachers of Latvia. The aim of the conference was to present new research about the relationship between the Holocaust and the arts (drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, contemporary art, the art of commemoration), as well as the ways individuals reacted to atrocities, how they tried to preserve their human dignity, and how the traumatic experience of the Holocaust has influenced European society.



One of the lectures at the conference was dedicated to the life and work of the artist Felix Nussbaum, the author of the famous painting *Self-Portrait with a Jewish ID*, created in 1943, a year before he was killed at Auschwitz. The original of this painting could be seen at the Neue Gallery Museum in New York at an exhibition in the spring of 2019

During the 1.5 intensive working days of the conference, 19 presentations were made by speakers from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, France, USA, Hungary, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The conference was

attended by more than 150 people, including about 60 history teachers from Latvian middle and high schools.

Conference organizers are planning to publish a collection of the reports at a later date.

The 10th World Reunion of the Liepaja (Libau) Jewry, organized by the Liepaja Jewish Heritage Foundation in collaboration with the Liepaja Jewish community, was held in Liepaja from July 25–28. The reunion was dedicated to the centenary of Latvia’s independence, the 220th anniversary of the Liepaja Jewish community, and the 30th anniversary of its restoration.



Unveiling of a monument to Jewish soldiers who perished in the battles for Latvian independence in 1919

85 guests from 10 countries participated in reunion, including former Liepaja residents and their descendants. At the opening ceremony, the video greeting of the former prisoner of the Liepaja Ghetto, vice president of JSL Professor George Schwab, was screened. Professor Schwab was unable, for the first time, to travel from New York and participate in the reunion. Participants visited memorial sites related to the Holocaust in Liepaja. This year’s central event was the unveiling of a restored monument in the Jewish sector of the Livu Cemetery dedicated to the Jewish soldiers who fell in 1919 in the battles for Latvia’s independence. The words “Soldiers of the Latvian Liberation Army of Jewish Nationality” are engraved on the black marble monument in Latvian and Yiddish alongside the names of the victims. The monument was originally put in place and opened in 1934.



At the end of 2018, prosecutor Monvid Zelch had made the decision to terminate the criminal proceedings against Herbert Cukurs; this decision was then approved by the head of the Latvian Justice Department. The *Courier* reported about this in its last issue. This decision ignited



## NEWS FROM LATVIA AND ELSEWHERE (continued)

a wave of protests among the Jews of Latvia and Latvian Jews overseas for whom the name of Cukurs has for many years been associated with the torture and murder of Jews in the Riga ghetto. In April 2019, Attorney General Eric Kalnmeyers commented on this situation in the media, in which he invited Margers Vestermanis, a member of the Historical Commission under the President of Latvia and the founder of the Jews in Latvia Museum, to provide certified copies of evidence of Cukurs's crimes to the prosecutor's office. As a result, the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia turned to the Justice Department in May with a request to reopen the criminal case, considering the new additional evidence. In July, several more additional certified documents were provided to the Justice Department. Expectations are that the Justice Department will soon make a new decision on this issue; the *Courier* will report on developments in its next issue.

During six days, July 8 to 13, 2019, the summer school "Challenging the Past: Jewish Heritage Study" was held in Latvia and Lithuania. It was organized by the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia in cooperation with the Jews in Latvia Museum, and was supported by several appropriate institutions in Lithuania and Sweden.



*Professor Ruvin Ferber conducts a class*

The school's program included an impressive series of diverse lectures, workshops, visits and cultural events, held in six Latvian and Lithuanian towns and cities with large Jewish communities (Riga, Bauska, Pakruojis, Šeduva, Kėdainiai and Kaunas). It was aimed at giving participants the opportunity of learning how Jewish history has influenced local culture and vice versa, to explore Jewish life and culture today and to immerse themselves in Jewish heritage and history. The program included a combination of lectures, workshops and meetings with a range of professionals working directly in the field of Jewish cultural heritage, and combined the complementary subjects of Jewish culture, religion

and heritage with history, covering the historical, textual, and linguistic contexts of Jewish heritage.

The 6th International Conference "The Holocaust Museums in XXI Century: Challenges and Opportunities," which was organized by the Shamir Society, met on May 21-22, 2019, in Riga at the Park Inn Radisson hotel.



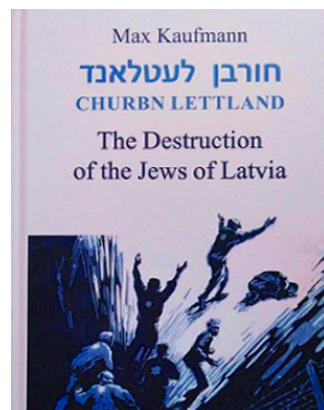
*In the hall of "The Holocaust Museums in XXI Century" conference*

Experts from Australia, Belarus, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States shared their knowledge, experience, and developments in the field of preserving the memory of the Holocaust. The conference was attended by ambassadors and representatives of Canada, Germany, Spain, Russia, Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, and the Slovak Republic.

The conference brought together professionals who work to preserve the historical memory of the Holocaust; they discussed the challenges they face in their work and possible solutions.

Shamir Publishing House has just published the English version of Max Kaufmann's book *Churbn Lettland. The Destruction of the Jews of Latvia*, in hardcover, with comments by Dr. Grigory Smirin. This expanded version had previously been available in Latvian and Russian. The book describes the tragic events of the Holocaust in Latvia as remembered by Max Kaufmann and several other Jewish survivors.

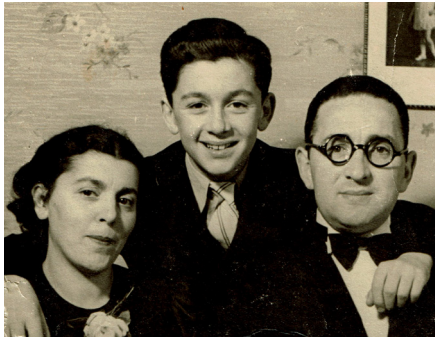
Since July 2019, the book has been available at the Information Center of the Riga Ghetto and Holocaust in the Museum of Latvia.



**Compiled by Ivar Brod**  
**Translated by Mariya Taukule**

# SASHA SEMENOFF: MUSICIAN AND BANDBLEADER

*In the fall of 2010 we began to compile articles about outstanding native Latvian Jews in the U.S. to be included in the Latvian Jewish Encyclopedia, planned for publishing by the Shamir society in Riga.*



*Abraham Shapiro with his parents on the day of his Bar Mitzvah, 1937*

**Semenoff, Sasha** (né Abraham Shapiro) was born on September 20, 1924, in Riga; he died on January 5, 2013. A former inmate of the Riga ghetto, he was violinist, music teacher, songwriter and bandleader. He began playing the piano at age 6 and

received his first violin at age 9; he attended Rauhvarger's School and Music School. With the start of Nazi occupation in July 1941, the infamous Herbert Cukurs moved the entire Shapiro family into their basement while he moved into their apartment. Cukurs forced the young Abraham to play the piano during night orgies and wash the cars and buses that were returning to the garage (which he also had to clean) from shootings of the "Arajs Team" during the day. From the fall of 1941 until March of 1945, Abraham was a prisoner in the Riga ghetto and the Stutthof and Burggraben concentration camps. Many years later, he said in one interview that his playing music on many instruments soothed the fiery tempers of Nazi commanders and prevented them from killing him. After his release in the autumn of 1945, he returned to Riga where he met with his sister; after a week's stay, he was able to return to West Germany with the help of the Jewish Committee in Prague. He settled in Munich, where he enrolled in and, in 1949, graduated from Handel Conservatory. In that same year, he was invited by Mr. Semenoff, his recently found uncle in Los Angeles, to come to the United States. His uncle was a famous ballet dancer and choreographer. Upon arrival, Abraham Shapiro changed his name to Sasha Semenoff and settled in New York. His career in the United States began at the famous Waldorf-Astoria as the orchestra violinist. He played on many famous American stages with various orchestras; in 1959, he formed



*Sasha Semenoff and his band, with George H. W. and Barbara Bush*



*Sasha Semenoff playing violin*

his own violin orchestra called "Romantic Strings" and moved to Las Vegas where he resided for many years. His orchestra was extremely popular and was invited to play in the most elite concert halls and hotels. He performed with his Romantic Strings in the Dunes Hotel, Sultan's Table, and other major hotels.



*Sasha Semenoff and his violin with Bill Clinton and his saxophone*

In addition to fronting the orchestras at the Dunes and Caesars Palace as "Sasha Semenoff and His Romantic Strings," Semenoff opened the M.G.M. Grand (now Bally's) and the Excalibur and worked most of Frank Sinatra's private parties, including his wedding to Mia Farrow. For years he was called "Frank Sinatra's favorite violinist." Semenoff helped open the International (later the Las Vegas Hilton and now the Las Vegas Hotel) with his orchestra, with Barbra Streisand as the main star. He stayed on for Elvis Presley's long engagement. He also played with stars such as the famous "Rat Pack" (Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr.). Sasha and his strings performed for Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton.



*Sasha Semenoff talks about the ghetto to Mitchell Lieber, the director of the film Rumbula's Echo*

From 1973 to 1986, Sasha and his Romantic Strings performed nightly at the M.G.M. Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. He performed on several CDs, participated in the creation of TV shows and movies, wrote his own compositions and songs, some of which were dedicated to the tragic years of the Holocaust. He also appeared on television shows, including *Pleasure Palace*, *Hearts Are Wild*, *MacShayne*, and *Vegas* and was seen in the movies *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Vegas Vacation*, and *Casino*.

**By Ivar Brod**

**Translated by Alan Solovey**

## MATERIALS ABOUT LATVIAN JEWS IN THE YIVO (YIDDISH SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE)

# YIVO

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research  
 יידישער וויסנשאפטלעכער אינסטיטוט • יז"א

Not everyone is aware that the YIVO Institute for Jewish Studies in New York City was first established in Vilnius in 1925. This institute's first

scientific supervisor was Professor Max Weinreich, a Latvia native, who established it as a center for Jewish (Yiddish) literature and folklore, psychology, history, and education. Below, we have briefly discussed materials on Latvian Jews in various thematic collections at YIVO. These are sets of documents from Jewish societies (parties), including the Bund, OZE, and ORT, as well as manuscripts and personal archives of prominent Jewish figures, materials about the Holocaust, documents of immigration organizations in America, and printed materials—newspapers, magazines, books, published documents, posters, photos, sound recordings, and movies. Keep in mind that a significant part of the materials transferred from Latvia to Vilnius in the 1920s-1930s was destroyed during the war.

### Materials of the Bund in Latvia

A large collection of documents from the Bund, the Jewish Workers' Union (created in 1897) is kept in the YIVO. Outside of Russia, the Bund was represented by the Foreign Committee located in Geneva, Switzerland. Here, in 1899, the Bund archive was created to preserve important organizational documents and printed materials. In 1992, the Bund Archive was transferred to the YIVO. This archive also contains documents from different years, reflecting the various activities of the Latvian Bund.

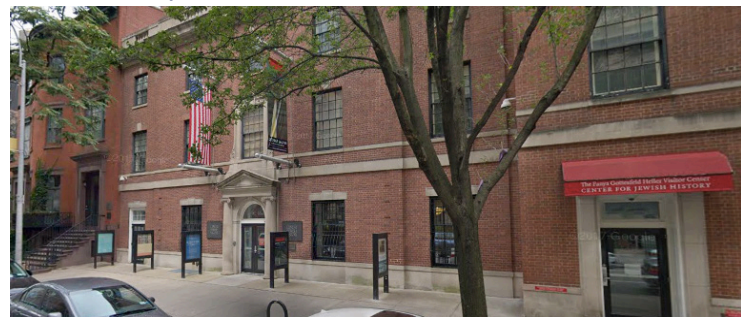
The materials are presented in separate folders for different localities in Latvia; the available reports indicate that large organizations of the Bund existed not only in Riga and major cities such as Dvinsk (Daugavpils), Libau (Liepaja), and Rezhitsa (Rezekne), but also in small ones, such as Kreslavka (Kraslava), Glazmanka (Gostini), and Goldingen (Kuldiga). These organizations were most active at the beginning of the 20th century—during the events of 1905. Accordingly, most of the documents in the YIVO refer to this period. Originals from 1903-1910 are in the collection, along with minutes of general meetings of Bund members (with up to several hundred participants) and meeting minutes of governing bodies in cities, letters to the Foreign Committee about the Bund defense groups in 1905, reports on financial activities, activities of the Bund groups and clashes with Cossacks in Riga in the fall 1905, letters about pogroms, election protocols in the cities of delegates to the 5th Congress of the RSDRP (Russian Social-Democrat Worker's Party), and letters on the progress of State elections of the Duma (Parliament) of Russia. Most of the documents are in Russian, with some in Yiddish. The archive also contains printed materials of the Bund's activities in Latvia: newspaper clippings, including American ones (for example, an article called "Kreslavka" written for a whole page of the newspaper *Forverts* in June 1912, and articles from *Forverts* in the 1950s), as well as numerous leaflets and newsletters. The contents of the leaflets are mainly appeals

to the workers of the cities, to sailors and soldiers, and to urban society. Some of the Bund leaflets contain unusual messages, such as "For the entire Christian population of Dvinsk" (April 1905) or "To the street" (February 1905). Leaflets and bulletins are printed in Russian and Yiddish, a few in Latvian—most were printed by the city printing houses of Bund, but some of them were printed on a hectograph (copying machine).

The materials of the Latvian Bund from the 1920s-40s are kept mainly in the personal archives of Latvian Bund figures such as Abram (Sergey) Braun, Isaac Levin-Szackes, and Noah Maisel during their stay in America.

### OZE Documents from Latvia

The OZE (Jewish Society of Public Health) was established in St. Petersburg in 1912 by a group of Jewish doctors, lawyers, and prominent public figures to maintain healthy living conditions, provide medical treatment, prevent epidemics, etc., among Russian (which included Latvian) Jews. The activity of the OZE in Latvia dates to the 1920s, with even greater activity in the 1930s. The archive of the OZE in the YIVO contains materials (meeting minutes, decisions) of the OZE representative offices in Riga, Liepaja, Rezekne, Daugavpils, Ludza, Livani, Kraslava, and Varaklani of the 1930s (mainly between 1937 and 1940), calendars, instructions, budgets and statistics, and correspondence of famous Jewish doctors and activists of the OZE (e.g., Dr. B. Dubinsky, Dr. Y. Mark, and others). The OZE materials on Latvia, which constitute a significant part of the collection, include documents on the activities of OZE in Latvia in the critical years of 1938–1940 and on the attempts to assist the needy Jewish population of Latvia from the OZE headquarters in Paris.



*The YIVO building in Manhattan*

### ORT Documents from Latvia

Materials of the ORT (Association for the Promotion of Skilled Trades created in Russia in 1880; later became an international Jewish organization) that are in the YIVO are kept in several collections, one of which is the collection of the American ORT Department (American ORT Federation Records 1922-1960). Materials are kept in folders by country, including Latvia; these materials include correspondence, reports, and press releases on the activities of the organization. The Latvian folder contains clippings of publications from the 1930s, ORT financial reports in Riga, an overview of the pupils of the ORT Riga School, and a newsletter of the American Jewish Congress about the work of the

## MATERIALS ABOUT LATVIAN JEWS IN THE YIVO (continued)

ORT in Latvia. Separate folders contain documents on the work of vocational schools in Latvia in Daugavpils, Liepaja, and Riga.

### Materials About the Holocaust in Latvia

The materials from the Holocaust are held by the YIVO, including written accounts of surviving former ghetto prisoners and survivors of concentration camps from different countries; these are collected in three series according to the period: records from 1945, records from 1954, and records after 1960. Collected in a separate file are firsthand accounts by surviving prisoners from the Baltic countries, including Latvia; these include testimonies about the ghettos in Riga, Daugavpils, and Kaunas.

### Personal Archives and Manuscripts

The collection consists of fragments of many literary archives that were part of the YIVO archive in Vilna before 1941. The collection is based on personal materials of more than 600 Jewish writers and cultural figures from Eastern Europe: autobiographical recordings, letters, newspaper clippings, and announcements. Among them, in addition to the most well-known Latvian figures Max Weinreich and Simon Dubnov, are manuscripts and autographs of Dr. Itzhok-Nachman Steinberg, Yudel Mark, Mendel Mark, Michla Kitaj, Rabbi Mordechai Nurok, Professor Nikolay Perferkovich, Professor Max Schatz-Anin, Zeev Wolfe Lacki-Bertoldi, Abram (Sergey) Braun, Isaac Levin-Szackes, and Noah Maisel.

### Printed Materials and Public Records

Among the many printed materials from 1907 until nowadays that were published in Latvia or about Latvian Jews, the greatest value lies in the first Yiddish newspapers published in Riga (microfilm): *National Zeitung* (1907); *Gekhaver* (1909); *Di Yiddishe Shtime* (1910); and *Unzere Vort* (December 1918-Jan 1919). Researchers will find the following publications especially interesting: *Almanac of the Union of Jewish Disabled War Veterans* of 1938; *Aliya-1937*, in Yiddish: *15 yor Letland-1933*; *Di Idishe shulbavegung in Letland-1926*; *Unzer Teatr-1926*. Among more than 750 books of commemoration, (*yizker-bikher*) are some written by Latvian Jews.

### Materials of Immigrant Organizations in America (Landsmanshaftn Collection)

The YIVO archives contain materials from 918 Jewish immigrant organizations. These immigrants made the journey from Eastern Europe to the United States. Among them are documents in several organizations from Latvia. Here is a summary:

1. Mutual aid society of young people from Kurland (Kurlander Young Men's Mutual Aid Society). The folder houses a collection dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the society "Fiftieth Anniversary of KYMMAS, 1889-1939." These include congratulatory letters (including from the White House, from the governor, etc.); lists of leaders, committees (health, financial, recreation, etc.); greetings from Mordechai Nurok; the history of the organization with a list of outstanding figures in different years;



The Reading Room at YIVO

lists of members of the organization and their registration cards—approx. 600 members. An additional folder holds documentation of the Harlem branch (Harlem Kurlander YM Aid Society). A list of the members, letters and a map of the cemetery, indicating the burial places of the former members of the organization, are included.

2. Relief Society of Riga (Riga Relief). The organization's Brooklyn address is included and the list of members of the leadership in 1948 for the Chapter of Riga-Latvian Relief Federation of American Jews, Inc. There is also a page out of the Yiddish newspaper *Morning Freiheit* with the article "Riga Relief," which describes in detail the creation and activities of the organization. Also available are memoirs of members of the organization. A 1947 booklet "Jewish Latvian Relief, Inc." is included—this was provided by the American Jewish Historical Society. The booklet lists the organization's offices (Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia, and Montreal), and also offers a list of the presidium (president: L. Lebov, and honorary president: Rabbi M. Nurok), a description of the organization's activities, numerous announcements about finding relatives, and a list of refugees from European countries, with the same list for cities in Latvia separately.

3. Society members of the Bund from Dvinsk (Dvinsker Bund Branch 75). The folder has an anniversary booklet "The 50th Golden Jubilee Celebration, 1904-1954," published in May 1954. Contents include: greetings in Yiddish and in English, both personal and from official organizations (social services, health department, workers, etc.), and a list of members—about 150 families with addresses, with the greetings in Yiddish.

4. Association of Krustpils-Jekabpils (Kreitzburger Jacobstadter Association). The society was founded in 1918 with about 100 members. It collapsed in 1977. The folder contains the protocols, financial reports, correspondence, and burial materials.

5. Association of immigrants from Rezekne (Bnai Rezitza Association, Inc.), the association was founded in 1893 with the aim of building its own synagogue in New York. Among the materials preserved are the association's charter, meeting minutes, and correspondence.

Compiled by Ivar Brod