



PANERIAI - BEGINNING OF MODERN HISTORY OF LITHUANIAN JEWS

On the morning of August 23, the eve of the opening of the III-rd Congress of the World Litvaks, all the participants came to the memorial in Paneriai to honour the memory of the victims of the genocide of the Jews. The ceremony was attended by the Speaker of the Parliament of Lithuania, Mr. Arūnas Valinskas, Chairman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, dr. Simonas Alperavičius, the Ambassador of Israel for Lithuania and Latvia, Mr. Chen Ivri Apter, representatives of former inmates of the ghettos and concentration camps, representatives of the Lithuanian government, Chief Rabi of Lithuania and Vilnius, Chaim Burshtein, honorary cantor of Vilnius choral Synagogue Taharat a-Kodesh Josephas Malovany, executive director of the Jewish Community of Lithuania Mr. Simonas Gurevičius, foreign guests, the Jews of Vilnius and Lithuanian communities.

He post-war history of the Jews of Lithuania starts from the forest of Paneriai, where the Jews of Vilnius were murdered, and from another two hundred locations of mass killings, from the devastated and broken old Jewish cemeteries, from broken down and dilapidating old synagogues and yeshivas.

The pine-trees of Paneriai where the witnesses of how the local murderers ordered armless old men, women and children to undress before they were shot dead not to smear their clothes that the killers sold later to their neighbours.

The pine-trees of Paneriai heard the rounds of machine guns and rifles, cries of horror and the last groans of the dying. Perhaps the trunks of the trees still keep the bullets of the German machine guns and shot guns, which zipped over the children's heads when the children were pushed alive into the ditch, killed with spades and the ditch filled up with soil... The wounded trees preserve the memory...

Paneriai is a silent symbol of the everlasting memory and sorrow of the robbed and destroyed Lithuanian Jews.

After the war, a monument was erected on the hill in Paneriai for the money donated by the Jews of Vilnius. The inscription on it in Yiddish reminded that at this place the Nazis and their collaborators murdered 70 thousand Jews.

The monument and the inscription turned to be unacceptable for the Soviet officials. In a letter to the first secretary of the Lithuanian communist party, Mr. Antanas Sniechkus, said that "the monument does not reflect anything Soviet". In 1952, the Lithuanian government blew up the monument and erected a concrete Stella instead incrusting with granite crumbs with an inscription that said: "To the victims of fascist terror. 1941-1944". Not a word about who was murdered, who were the murderers, what was the reason...

That was the Lithuanian government's reply to the Jews' attempt to honour the memory of their own people.

le. That was the first time when the officials exchanged their opinion silently with the Jews.

The communists who were in power in Lithuania silently avoided the topic of the participation of the local people in the massacre of the Jews. Unfortunately, the people of Lithuania still do not fully comprehend the

torn down from the monument and stolen by local vandals. The police never found them. A new menorah was made of wood worthless for the robbers - that was the Jewish reply.

Wreaths and flowers are solemnly placed by the monument; candles are lit and memory rocks are placed there to follow the Jewish tradition;

cessary to change the text. Last year it was improved: "The Day of Memory of the Jewish Genocide". What does it mean if the most important word is missing "victims"? "Memory of the Genocide Victims", but not "Memory of the Genocide"! Victims of the Genocide!

This year, the Commission for the

"...those who were children during the war are elderly people today. Those who were young people then and survived the horrors of the concentration camps, they did not return to Lithuania where nobody was waiting for them; they went to Palestine - Israel. (...) Have we done everything to their benefit, have we done everything to immortalise the memory of the victims? As I understand, we have not done enough."

The Chairwoman is convinced that "too few people in Lithuania know where Paneriai is located or how to find the State Jewish Museum (...). There no signs about it in the city. It is strange that there is no Holocaust museum in Lithuania, in a country where 95 per cent of the Jewish people were massacred.", said Mrs. F.Kukliansky. "We talk a lot, but our speeches often are fruitless".

She reminded that "until now, the member of our community, the prisoner of Vilnius Ghetto, Fania Brancovskaja, like Rocha Margolis, have not received any apology from the prosecutor's office or a decision to terminate the pre-trial investigation against them". She added that in Lithuania "people doubt about the innocence of the anti-fascist Jews who managed to survive. There was a discussion if there were enough evidence to support their guilt - what kind of guilt? The guilt of being alive until today?", rhetorically asked Mrs. F.Kukliansky.

"Law cannot emerge on the basis of lawlessness", said Mrs. F.Kukliansky. "All our property that was unlawfully taken from us and never returned will never become lawfully acquired."

Mr. F.Kukliansky mentioned one of the most burning problems in Lithuania: "Those who dared to shoot at powerless and unarmed people do not have the right to have even the family names; however, they have to be named. Even if it is too late to penalise them, they have to be known", said the Chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Vilnius.

Mrs. F.Kukliansky finished her speech with the following words: "While we stand at this place, we promise once again that we will never forget anything and we will be thankful to those who help us, and we will forgive only those who ask for forgiveness."

The Ambassador of Israel, Mr. Chen Ivri Apter, called the commemoration of the Holocaust victims one of the most important problems that have an impact on the relations between Lithuania and Israel. The best way to honour the memory of the victims is to educate the young people, tell the truth about the Holocaust and learn a lesson from the history and the Holocaust", said the Ambassador.

As usually, the Lithuanian mass media thought it sufficient to make short announcements about the mournful ceremony in Paneriai. After that - silence.

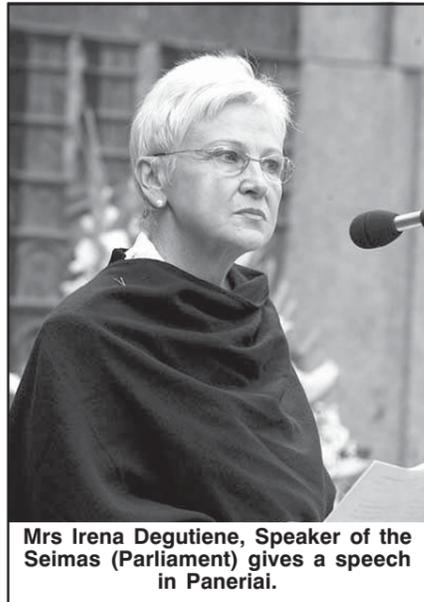
The problems voiced by the speakers were well memorised, as usual, by those present at the memorial ceremony at Paneriai. They were the only ones who heard the orators' speeches and heard the weeping of Boris Kirzner's violin, the beautiful voice of Rafailas Karpis that sounded so nicely in the autumn air of the forest - he was singing the tragic melody "Eli Eli". They were the ones who saw how the schoolchildren of Vilnius secondary schools appeared from all sides of the memorial with lit candles and put the candles on the ground before the monument until the candle fire produced the shape of the Star of David.

Finally, the schoolchildren of Vilnius Sholom Aleichem Jewish School assemble in front of the monument; they hold yellow balloons in their hands. As they approach the monument, they let the balloons fly into the sky one after another. A few balloons caught pine-tree branches and looked at the people from above, while the people looked through tears at the balloons flying up into the blue sky; they reminded them of the yellow patches on the chests of Ghetto prisoners...

Milanas CHERSONSKIS

DIALOGUE IN PANERIAI

real scope of the Jewish tragedy that was horrifying in such a small country. During the Soviet times, the word "Jews" was excluded from all the places of mass killings of the Jews, like Paneriai. Instead, the word was replaced by the words "people" and "Soviet", which do not belong to any national community. They are of no origin.



Mrs Irena Degutiene, Speaker of the Seimas (Parliament) gives a speech in Paneriai.

In the Soviet times, the Nazi collaborators were tried for "the killing of peaceful Soviet people" and for "the organized and armed resistance against the Soviet government". Three post-war generations grew up in Lithuania under intense "brainwashing"; they either do not know anything or have just sporadic and unreliable knowledge about the all-out killings of the Jews who lived in Lithuania for five and a half centuries and contributed substantially to all the areas of political, economic, religious, cultural, and public life.

When the independence of Lithuania was restored in 1991, a new monument was built in Paneriai 30 years after the old Soviet one had been erected. It was initiated by a former Vilnius citizen, an Israeli resident Ishijahu Epshtein, and built for the money collected by former Vilnius citizens and their descendants abroad. Its inscription in Yiddish, Lithuanian and Hebrew tells about the tragedy of the Jews of Vilnius. That was the first Jewish letter to the independent Lithuania.

A bronze menorah - a symbol of everlasting Jewish memory - was

the prayer for the dead, kaddish, is being delivered. Former partisans sing a Jewish partisan song in Yiddish "Zog nit keinmol...", other participants join in.

At the Paneriai memorial, the most important dialogue takes place in the last two decades between the leaders of independent Lithuania and the leadership of the Jewish Community in Lithuania. At the commemorations like this, with the participation of local Jews and foreign ones alongside with accredited diplomats of foreign countries, the country leaders patiently listen to the speeches delivered by the community leaders about their acute problems, instances of anti-Semitism, xenophobia and vandalism, about persecution of the Jewish partisans, about the acquittal of the persons who participated in the killings of the Jews, about the necessity to educate the tolerance of the young generation, etc. The state leaders express proper understanding of the Jewish sorrow and say their condolences, but they do nothing to improve the situation; they do not take a single step towards reconciliation and healing of the wounds. The promises of high-ranking officials to change something in the

near future can be clearly heard over the loudspeakers, and the echo of the forest around has been taking these promises away for the last decade or so. Words, words, words...

On August 23 this year, a speech in Paneriai was delivered by Mr. Valinskas. He said the right words about "the Holocaust to become one of the most important memories of our nation and the most important historic experience". However, he did not say a word about the fact that most of the secondary schools do not treat the topic of the Holocaust seriously; the textbooks do not include a single page on it; most of the teachers are silent about these burning issues and put the blame for the Holocaust solely on the Germans.

Chairman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, Dr. Simonas Alperavičius, pointed out in his speech that a specific Jewish way of life was destroyed during the war - religion, culture, traditions, and customs. "It is very difficult for me to speak, because there were a number of my close relatives among the people murdered here", said S.Alperavičius. He noted that "the Lithuanian public still cannot understand that the tragedy of the Lithuanian Jews is the tragedy of the Lithuanian people". He is convinced that the younger generations "have to know all the truth about what happened. The future generations have to learn from these facts of history. They chime like a bell to us and call for us to be vigilant".

The prayer for the dead was delivered by a world-famous cantor from New York, honorary cantor of Vilnius Synagogue Taharat a-Kodesh, Joseph Malovany.

WE WILL NEVER FORGET ANYTHING

For 18 years the Seimas (Parliament) of Lithuania called August 23-rd "The day of the Lithuanian Jews' Genocide". Terrible! It has been known well: "What is not forbidden, is allowed." The text approved by the Supreme Council of Lithuania on October 30, 1990, Decree No 1-730, does not forbid undertaking Jewish genocide.

For over a decade "LoJ" has been reminding the members of Parliament and its employees that it is ne-

cessary to change the text. Last year it was improved: "The Day of Memory of the Jewish Genocide". What does it mean if the most important word is missing "victims"? "Memory of the Genocide Victims", but not "Memory of the Genocide"! Victims of the Genocide!

The coordinator of educational programmes, Ingrida Vilkiene, sent out recommendations to all the schools and Tolerance centres with the correct name of the mournful day and the description of its content, the Jewish symbols, ways of attracting schoolchildren to participate in the commemoration.

On September 23, the day to remember the Jewish tragedy, schoolchildren of 46 schools around the country took part in the event "The Memory Light", which was organised at the memorials to the Jewish genocide victims.

At Paneriai, the commemoration ceremony started with the poems by the Nobel Prize Laureate, Eli Visel, in Yiddish, which were emotionally recited by Misha Jakobas, director of Vilnius Jewish secondary school. Wreaths and flowers were laid by the monument on behalf of the President of Lithuania, the Seimas and the Government, the Municipality of Vilnius City, the Jewish Community of Lithuania, the Ministry of Culture and other organisations, foreign embassies, the Union of Former Ghetto and Concentration Camp Prisoners, the Union of the II-nd World War Veterans.



Mrs. Faina Kukliansky, Chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Linius, gives her speech in Paneriai.

A speech was given by the Speaker of the Seimas (Parliament) Mrs. Irena Degutiene: "The Holocaust is not the tragedy of the Jewish people alone, it is the tragedy and pain of all of us. It is especially obvious here, in Lithuania, where we lost the absolute majority of Jewish sons and daughters of Lithuania; thus, we lost a great deal of our cultural and social state identity."

A moving speech by Mrs. I.Degutiene included a call "to accept the past without making it nicer: to remember and remind of it so that it may never happen again. To accept that hatred, whatever theories it is based on, will always be a dead end".

"Perhaps it is symbolic that we think and speak about the future of the Jews here, in Paneriai; we create a new life by remembering the tragedy", bravely said Mrs. I.Degutiene.

She added that "today the question - who is to blame - is the most important. More important is to look into the eyes of each other and be grateful that we are together".

The next speaker was the Chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Vilnius, Mrs. Kukliansky. She said

Declaration by Mr. S. Alperavičius, Chairman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania

In recent days, certain mass media published comments on my assessment of Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

I am sorry to say that once again the so-called Jewish card has been used making mischief between the Lithuanians and the Jews - citizens of Lithuania. I deplore the attempts to revive the so-called "double genocide" or "symmetry" theories. I am convinced that if there was no victory of the coalition forces in World War II, the fate of the Jews and many other nations and states would have been different. I wish to reiterate once again that the Holocaust in Lithuania was a huge tragedy not only for the Jews but also for Lithuania.

I would like to state unequivocally that both Hitler and Stalin lead criminal régimes responsible for the murder of millions of innocent people, hundreds of thousands of innocently exiled Lithuanian people, Jews among them. The Jewish Community of Lithuania deplores any attempts at downgrading the crimes of either the fascist, or the Stalinist régimes. The Jewish Community of Lithuania is of the opinion that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact provided for the basic conditions for Lithuania to lose its independence and opened the door for the Jewish genocide crimes committed by the fascist regime and its collaborators.

The Jewish Community of Lithuania deplores any attempts at questioning the loyalty of the Jews, citizens of Lithuania, to their motherland, Lithuania, including the attempts to degrade the cooperation of the Jewish Community of Lithuania with the Government of Lithuania and other state institutions.

Dr. Simonas Alperavičius Chairman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania