

Text of the open letter signed by a group of students and faculty at the Vilnius Summer Program in Yiddish Language and Literature (an intensive course held each year at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute). The text was prepared by Elliott Palevsky, a member of the faculty, himself the son of Holocaust survivors and former anti-Nazi partisans from Vilna, in consultation with other program participants.

Vilnius, 19th of August, 2008

Open Letter to
President Adamkus,
Prime Minister Kirkilas,
Minister of Foreign Affairs

We the undersigned students and faculty of the 2008 Vilnius Summer Program in Yiddish Language and Literature at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute (Vilnius University) are of many nationalities and religious traditions, from 16 countries. We have come to this beautiful, hospitable, modern European city to be enriched by the cultural treasures here created and lived by those who over many centuries earned for Vilna the name “Jerusalem of Lithuania.”

It would be impossible for us to remain unaware of the struggle now going on for the soul of this heroic country as it works to re-establish a proud tradition as an independent nation free from foreign oppression; a welcome member in the family of nations of the enlightened, democratic free world.

At issue ultimately is what will remain the history that forms and informs the consciousness of this nation and the world. The most tragic and heroic Jewish epoch of resistance to the Nazi slaughter is first criminalized then sacrificed on the alter of the kind of nationalism that is energized by anti-Semitism and disguised as anti-Sovietism.

In the meantime the small, decent and struggling Jewish community of Vilna has anti-Semitic acts unleashed upon it. We applaud the immediate condemnation of these hateful acts by President Adamkus, Prime Minister Kirkilas and Minister of Foreign Affairs Vaitiekunas. We now call upon them to also remove the shadow of investigation from the few surviving anti-Nazi partisans, among them Fania Brantsovskaja, distinguished librarian and historical guide. Also included are Yitshok Arad, founding director of Yad Vashem in Israel and Rachel Margolis, a founder of the Holocaust Museum, in Vilna who can't return to visit, work or lecture here for fear of legal investigation and possible prosecution.

As students and faculty we had been treated with courtesy and hospitality by the people of Vilnius, we have also been deeply disturbed by recent events. We see our very presence here as an act of solidarity with the Jewish community and all people in Lithuania working toward the goal of re-establishing itself as a great nation in which no one need ever be afraid.

There is a great danger when one begins to re-mill the grains of truth. Real people are crushed between stones, sacred memories are desecrated, understanding, analysis and the historic record are compromised and world culture is debased.

We look forward to an extension of the sensitivity already shown by the leaders of government to include the entire heroic epoch of the Jewish anti-Nazi resistance as a proud part of Lithuanian history.