

## **Commemoration of Holocaust in Lithuania**

The Holocaust is the most horrible human tragedy of the 20th century, which traumatised the whole world, including Lithuania. It is the most painful and bloodiest event in the country's history. It was only after Lithuania restored its independence in 1990 that historians had opportunities to explore the little-known pages of Lithuanian history, including the Holocaust that was organised and perpetrated by Nazi Germany military and police units assisted by local collaborators. It is only now that we are starting to come to grips with this terrible history.

In the middle of the 20th century, in the very heart of Europe, many people, influenced by complex circumstances of the time, easily submitted to the rules of a brutal game and to the roles assigned to them, whether as executioners, assistants or observers. We dare to admit that Lithuanians also collaborated with the Nazis in the atrocities of the Holocaust. The research has revealed the shockingly horrible scale of the Holocaust, which is beyond human comprehension.

As we mourn the thousands and thousands of Lithuanian Jews, Lithuania continues to remember and reflect on what has happened and why it happened.

Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas, during an official visit to Israel in 1995, apologised in the Knesset to the Jewish people on behalf of the Lithuanian nation for the actions of his compatriots who had participated in the Holocaust.

Education is one of the best instruments to protect the common values of humanity and to educate the younger generation in the spirit of humanism. In Lithuania, a member country of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) since 2002, the history of the Holocaust is being taught in schools. Last year educational curricula for all grades in secondary education was reviewed and IHRA Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust played an important role in developing the new curricula.

The Secretariat of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania initiated the Memory Road across Lithuania. The participants retraced the paths that the Holocaust victims were forced to walk to the sites of their massacre.

There are more than 160 Tolerance Education Centers in schools, local museums and educational centers established in different cities and towns across Lithuania.

Lithuanian Government approved the IHRA definition of antisemitism and recommended to all the public authorities to take this definition into account in their work. The efforts are devoted to promote the critical thinking of schoolchildren and students to ensure a more accurate understanding of the consequences of antisemitism.

The Lithuanian government has zero tolerance for any manifestations of anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, or disrespect for the murdered victims of the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism as a political ideology is not widespread in Lithuania. It is more like a tension or a defensive attitude in response to tragic and shameful aspects of the past, such as the involvement of Lithuanians in the Holocaust.

In addition to the existing Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History two new museums devoted to Lithuanian Jewry are being developed: Memorial Museum of Holocaust in Lithuania and the Vilna Ghetto and Museum of Culture and Identity of Lithuanian Jews.

The central and local governments in cooperation with the Lithuanian Jewish Community continue to re-arrange, maintain and mark the sites of mass killings of Jews by putting up memorial plaques and

erecting monuments, putting up directional signs on roads leading to the sites of killings and burial as well as installing information stands telling the history of the Holocaust.

Education and open dialogue based on facts are essential during our turbulent times.

Since the restoration of independence, Lithuania has consistently followed the principles of the restoration of historical justice.

Lithuanian Government fully delivered on its commitments in compliance with the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities to provide more than 37 million EUR (more than 40 million USD) as a compensation.

Last year Lithuania took another step of good will: adopted the amendment to the current Law and envisaged additional 37 million EUR (40 million USD) to be payed as a monetary compensation, also for the private realty including heirless one of Lithuanian Jews that Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes nationalized or illegally expropriated.

Individual cases of disputed glorification of historical figures are on the Lithuanian Governments' agenda. As much as commemoration of historical figures is linked to the municipal decisions the Government of Lithuania holds a dialogue with the local authorities concerning this issue. We see the importance of academic research and education so that the public is aware of the controversial figures and their wrongful honors. It is commendable that discussion on the past has started. It is a slow process to come clear about who are the real heroes of Lithuania.

Moreover, the Lithuanian Government has initiated new legislation to solve existing cases of disputed commemorations and to prevent such cases in the future. The new Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Prohibition of the Promotion of Totalitarian or Authoritarian Regimes and Their Ideologies will take effect this year.

As we remember and mourn the victims of the Holocaust, we also remember and honour the Righteous Among the Nations, whose heroic acts saving the Jews during the World War II preserved faith in the ideals of humanity and human conscience. We salute the bravery of more than 900 of them in Lithuania who risked their lives to save others. Today, they are the most powerful teachers of courage and determination who deserve the exceptional respect of all of us.

The Seimas (the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania) set March 15th as the remembrance Day of the Rescuers of Lithuanian Jews. March 15th was chosen in memory of Ona Šimaitė, the rescuer of the Jews of the Vilnius Ghetto during Nazis' occupation of Lithuania. On March 15, 1966 O. Šimaitė became the first Lithuanian to be awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel.

Also, the Seimas adopted amendments to the existing law whereby the rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust are treated as the equivalent to freedom fighters.

Although the number of the recipients of Righteous Among the Nations' title in Lithuania is one of the highest when compared to the size of the population, the international community knows little about their heroic stories. As they are the most compelling examples of true humanity, we all are obliged to make their stories heard.