



(A speech by Joseph Levinson, vice-chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, at a meeting in honour of the

memory of victims of the Holocaust in Gargždai, on June 24, 2001.)

This was one of the first, or perhaps in fact the very first site of the mass killing of Jews in Lithuania. It was here, just after the start of the war, that the Nazis shot dead 200 Jewish men from Gargždai, and thus began carrying out the Holocaust.

The killings were later continued by local Nazi collaborators, who "independently" murdered hundreds of Jewish women and children.

The Gargždai Jewish community, evidence of whose existence was found in documents from the 15th century, vanished. Before the war, Jews made up 30% of the Gargždai population. They were masters of various crafts, ran small businesses, exported grain, cattle, timber, floated rafts down the Minija River, and played an important role in the eco-

nomics of the town and district. The Gargždai Jewish community also had its own sports, cultural, and other public organizations; it was all totally destroyed.

On the monument beside us we read: "A never healing wound on Lithuanian soil". As we know, there are unfortunately approximately 200 such wounds in Lithuania. The basically extinguished world-famous Lithuanian community of Jews, which had formed over the centuries and taken root in this land, had made an important contribution to the development of Lithuania's economy and culture; it had participated in the struggle for Lithuanian independence and in strengthening its sovereignty after the First World War. Far beyond its borders, more than one Lithuanian Jewish cultural and public figure had brought fame to the name of Lithuania.

In commemorating the anniversary of the tragedy of Lithuania's Jews, we regretfully note that although 60 years have passed since that time, there are still attempts to justify the mass killing of Jews, to justify those who collabora-

ted with the Nazis and aided in massively murdering everyone from Jewish infants to old people. They killed them all, irrespective of political or religious affiliation, and regardless of their occupation, background, age or gender. No accusations had been brought against any of these people; they were all "guilty" of one thing - their nationality - only their nationality. And yet, today, when the death penalty has been abolished for even the worst of crimes, attempts are still made to justify this act.

Those who took part in the killings were of course hardly aiming for justice. Some of them were direct followers of Nazi ideology; others hoped to gain something, some political favor for their "services" and their assistance. And a significant number killed Jews and plundered their belongings in the belief that the Nazis would triumph and that their crimes would never be punished.

When talking about this period, it must also be said that even though many felt that Nazi power and victory were guaranteed, and even though death threatened anyone who aided the Jews, there were people in Lithuania,

including a fair number in Samogitia, who dismissed this danger to themselves and to their families, and who helped the Jews. These were people with the highest humanitarian standards. Many of them have already been honoured with awards from the State of Israel and the Republic of Lithuania.

I would like to take this opportunity to inform you that in my research into the history of the Gargždai Jews, in a book entitled "Lithuania's Jewish communities" (published in Hebrew, in Israel, several years ago), I found an account about a Jewess named Rachile, who managed to survive the terrible Gargždai massacre: she was the sole living witness of the killings. And she was saved by a teacher named Gricius - a true ray of sunlight in that time of darkness.

I discovered that the Rescuers' Section of the State Jewish Museum had no knowledge of this person. Following my request, they have taken measures to investigate the case, and to appropriately honour this rescuer for his heroism in the event that the facts are supported. To that end, I ask anyone who

might know anything about the event to pass on information to the Jewish Museum or the Lithuanian Jewish Community.

A true understanding of all that happened to the Gargždai Jewish community 60 years ago (the same thing that happened to all of Lithuania's Jewish communities) should be a reminder to all people of good will of the end result of a state applied policy of an ideology of cannibalistic chauvinism and national hatred and racism which allows its proponents the right to decide the fate of other nations and their right to live on this earth.

We cannot bring back to life the hundreds of thousands of innocent, murdered people. May a true understanding of that terrible tragedy serve to guarantee that nothing of its kind will ever be repeated.

I believe that the participants at this commemoration would concur with the inscription on a memorial which stands not far from Ukmergė, in the Pivonija woods, wherein lie the remains of more than 10,000 murdered Jews: "May their innocent blood awaken the conscience of everyone, and may people never again be killed". And I would like to add: may we hold sacred the memory of the innocent victims who perished during the Holocaust!