



## JEWISH MUSEUM

# JEWISH MUSEUM RENEWED HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION

An exhibition at the State Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum on the Holocaust in Lithuania was closed in July 2010, during the period when there is the greatest number of tourists. Explanation: it needs to be renewed. Why was the work taken on during the heat of the tourist season, and not before or after? No explanation.

## A LOOK AT THE PAST

In 1940, the Soviet government installed in Lithuania forbade all Jewish national organisations and enterprises, and confiscated their property because they did not conform to Soviet ideology. After the war there were some concessions - for example, the poets Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kacherginski were allowed to restore the Jewish museum. Three years later it was closed again.

At the end of 1952, during the "killers in white coats" campaign in the USSR (Lithuania included), preparations were being made for a new stage in the "plan to build Stalinist communism", which was to deport all USSR Jews to the Far East and Far North. Implementation of the plan was curtailed by the dictator's death. Deportations stopped, for an indefinite time.

"Holocaust"... "Catastrophe"... "Shoah"... In the Soviet period the words didn't exist either in dictionaries or in daily life. The so-called "Soviet peoples" were fostered in the spirit of "indestructible friendship between Soviet country nations". It was forbidden even to mention the fact that during the war Jews in Nazi occupied territory were killed not only by Nazis but also by their local collaborators.

Soviet authorities made archives secret, and information inaccessible. Only this "foundation" - lies, hypocrisy, hidden truth about what happened during the war years - could uphold the doctrine of "indissoluble friendship".

## WINDS OF CHANGE

At the end of the 1980s, the smell of freedom began to waft in Lithuania. More and more frequently, Jews gave some thought to their future. Some went off to Israel, others to the West, while others carried Lithuanian and Israeli flags and joined the Baltic Way to defend Lithuania's independence.

The restoration of independence brought changes to the life of the Jews. A Lithuanian Jewish Culture Support Association was set up in Vilnius in September 1988. The State Jewish Museum was established in 1989, and given the property of the one shut down in 1949 - items that had been gathering dust for forty years in the depositories of other museums.

The Jewish Museum was given the Paneriai pavilion and three buildings in Vilnius: the pre-war Jewish theatre in a building at Naugarduko St. 10/2 (a "Pioneer" cinema in the Soviet period), the building at Pylimo St. 4, and the "Green House" at Pamėnkalnio St. 12. Thirty-two year-old philologist Emanuelis Zingeris, who had neither historian nor art critic training, nor any knowledge of museum work or experience in directing a cultural institution, was appointed museum director. The new elite of Lithuanian authority wanted to demonstrate to the free world not its experts, but a symbol of the rebirth of the Jews in Lithuania - its own "Jew" - and the elite found E.Zingeris.

## ADVENTURES OF THE LITTLE GREEN HOUSE

Among the buildings slated for a Jewish museum was the single-storey Green House, which resembled both a farmhouse, and a suburban cottage. It is separated from the street by four-storey buildings. The unprepossessing construction, 50-55 metres on a sharp incline from the street, does not catch the eye of passersby. It would have probably been torn down during the Soviet period, but after the war someone remembered that in October 1918 it was the venue for the illegal first conference of the Lithuanian Communist Party. Through the windows of the small house one can see who is climbing up the hill - it was a good secret address should the police organise a raid.

On the 50th anniversary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, the outside walls of the house were painted dark green. The inside was filled with photographs of activists of the Lithuanian Communist Party, copies of documents and newspapers, a sculpture of Vincas Kapsukas. The secret house was named the Museum of the First LCP Congress, and given the sacred status of branch of the Museum of the Revolution. Pioneers and communist youth were taken there to be instilled with "loyalty to the beloved



The stand: "The start of the Holocaust".

Communist Party", and to be encouraged to fight for "the bright future of all mankind", etc.

By 1989, the new elite no longer needed the revolution museum and its green affiliate. This elite, intoxicated with power, high posts, big money, and the smell of real estate, now faced extensive concrete opportunities, including to privatise "nobody's" property. Party and communist youth graduates immediately stopped fighting for "the bright future of all mankind", and entered the fray for the bright present. The revolution museum was shut down.

On August 24, 1992, at the request of E.Zingeris, the minister of culture transferred the Green House, which no-one connects either to the Jews or to their history, onto the balance sheet of the Jewish museum. And that is where the exhibition on the Jewish Holocaust was presented. Announcements about museum events began to be hung in a window with glass doors on the corner of the four-storey building which blocked the Green House from the street. But the neo-Nazis and vandals kept breaking the glass and painting swastikas. As usual, the police couldn't find them, and the museum staff stopped

hanging out the announcements. The Green House once again became a secret address - now with the status of a Holocaust exhibition. Its address can be found in guide books or on the internet: it's not likely that passersby know what the house at the end of the yard represents.

## RENEWED EXHIBITION

The renewed Holocaust exhibition opened in the Green House on October 4, 2010. Participants at the opening included foreign ambassadors, invited members of the Jewish Community, and others. Museum director Markas Zingeris, who inherited this post from his true brother Emanuelis - who became a member (on the list of the "Tėvynės Sąjunga - Christian Democrats Party) of the Lithuanian Parliament in 2008 - gave the introductory speech.

M.Zingeris informed the audience that this was the sole permanent Holocaust exhibition in Lithuania, that the museum had added 320 new photographs and exhibits to its collection, and that it was interested not so much in foreign tourists as in the local population, especially the young generations.

The museum's oldest employee, Rachile Kostanian, talked about the difficulties in laying out the exhibition, and about, in her opinion, the commendable work of the designers, and read impressions by previous charmed foreign tourists from the Guest Book.

No government officials spoke during the opening, no-one said a word about the sole permanent Holocaust exhibition in Lithuania, no-one thanked or criticised the museum employees. No-one came, no-one wanted to talk about the Holocaust. Why not? Perhaps because there are influential politicians in Lithuania who are trying to convince the world that Stalin's repressions were indescribably more brutal than the Holocaust?

The invited guests were then offered an excursion through the renewed exhibition.

## EXCURSION

Together with the group I listen to what the excursion leader is saying. Unfortunately, the photographs she is referring to are small, and it's difficult to see them even from two steps away. When the group moves on, I look at them, and am therefore unable to find a good position at the next stand.

I join the group again in front of the television screen. The acquisition of this terminal is a good idea: on it one can watch documentary films, or their episodes. Unfortunately the screen is small. The possibilities of modern television could create a better impression, especially as viewers are now accustomed to large screens. But apparently conditions at the Green House don't permit the installation of a modern screen.

On the screen we see the face of a former policeman. He says that they were often sent to "carry out 'aktions'". Local residents actively helped to kill the Jews. It seems that he was more merciful to his victims. One time he had to kill an elderly man and his son. First he shot the father, for if he'd killed the son first, the father would have been upset, - he says, - but the son took his father's death quietly. A cannibal's "humanitarianism".

A few days later I went through the exhibition with Neringa Latvytė-Gustaitienė as a guide. I thank her for her help.

## IMPRESSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The possibilities for exhibitions at the Green House remain the same as before, i.e., less than minimal, while the number of exhibits has increased by 320

items. Which means that all of the exhibits have become smaller. And what does that do for the quality of the exhibition?

A photograph that is known worldwide has disappeared, who knows where, from the exhibition: a beautiful naked woman in the prime of life, full of energy and health, walks straight towards the viewer. God created her to be happy and loved, to be the beautiful mother of healthy children. She merits the paintbrush of a great artist. But on her left, in the photograph, we see her murderer - a local policeman. His right hand grabs her forearm to prevent her from fleeing, his left holds a gun. In a few minutes he will kill the Woman and push her corpse into a huge trench. All of the murdered people will be covered in lime. The killer will collect the clothes and exchange them for a litre of homebrew. We even know the bandit's name - Jonas Mikalauskas. The photograph disappeared from the renewed exhibition. Why? Did someone want to re-touch the horror of the Holocaust, to make it acceptable to Holocaust deniers and to those who stand behind their backs?

Instead, as if through a broken wall, we see another photograph: a woman holding a child, being shot in the back by a policeman. The small unlit photograph arouses neither compassion nor horror, but a feeling of disappointment: exhibited in this way, it does not reflect the tragedy of the situation. And this is far from the only example of inappropriate exhibiting, for there is no room in the Green House to expose exhibits appropriately.

The Holocaust is the greatest crime of the 20th century, and the greatest tragedy that Lithuania had ever experienced. The murder of over 200,000 innocent people, the destruction of the fruit of six centuries of tireless work by the Jews of Lithuania, had a strong effect on many hundreds of thousands of people, and on the psyche of all of the post-war generations - even today, regardless of the fact that a universal understanding that the killings were a national tragedy, has not yet begun.

For several thousand local Nazi collaborators and their relatives who were directly or indirectly connected to the unpunished killing of Jews, the killings were a source of income. They were supported both materially and ideologically, and could therefore feel that their work, the "cleansing" of the Lithuanian nation of Jews, was necessary. Today, sixty-five years after the Second World War, neither the sociological nor the psychological consequences of the Jewish tragedy have been overcome in Lithuania - they are reflected in the psyche of people who did not contribute to the killings, and who sometimes don't even know about them. The young generation needs help to somehow escape that crevice into which it is being pulled by neofascists, anti-Semites, and dirty-handed "activists" proclaiming various species of a "double genocide" theory.

One of the most effective ways to overcome the consequences of the tragedy is extensive and emotional education about the Holocaust. The exhibition should help viewers to experience THAT time emotionally, to imagine themselves in the place of THOSE people. It should strive to make the younger generations understand their civil duty to do everything to prevent such a tragedy from ever occurring again - not for the Jews, nor Lithuanians, nor Germans,



The Green House.

nor any other nationality.

Therefore it is first of all important that the exhibition space corresponds to the scale of the tragedy. One also needs original exhibits bearing traces of time. And if the Museum has such unique exhibits, they cannot be stored somewhere like the Green House, which is not fireproof.

## HISTORY: FROM AND TO WHERE?

Historically, the development of the Jewish community in Lithuania, before the Holocaust, took six centuries. The community and all of its branches - trades, commerce, finance, religion, science, art, etc. - grew in strength. It is impossible to show museum visitors community life prior to the Holocaust in two small rooms, and then all of the history of its devastation in another five similar small rooms, in the Green House.

Talented and hard-working experts work at the Jewish Museum. During its twenty years they have organised several good exhibitions dedicated to a certain time period, historical episode, biography, anniversary of an event, etc. Each of those exhibitions is a completed historical account based on theme, style, genre. But neither the quantity nor the quality of these separate exhibitions



Photograph missing from the exhibition.

solves the most important problem facing the State Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum - how to present the long history of the Jews of Lithuania, from their settling in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania up to the present day, as a uniform concept. The Museum has not resolved this task in its twenty years of existence. And based on the evidence, its heads (or perhaps the heads of its heads?) haven't even tried.

In order to create a uniform exhibition of the history of Lithuania's Jews, one must have a uniform concept of that history. That is the most important issue, and it must be discussed with experts. What is also needed is one space where such an exhibition could be presented. Only competent museum workers and architects can answer the question of whether the building on Pylimo St., or Naugarduko St. 10/2 are appropriate for such an exhibition.

Only a highly qualified historian, museum expert, and art critic who respects the history of the Jews of Lithuania, and who likes his/her profession can head such a project.

Milan CHERSONSKIJ



The stand: "On the eve of the Second World War".