



LITHUANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

Pylimo g. 4, LT-01117 Vilnius, tel. (8~5) 261 30 03, fax (8~5) 2127915, email info@lzb.lt
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Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I am sure you are aware of recent events in Lithuania.

We have had a long-standing problem with a commemorative plaque honoring Jonas Noreika in central Vilnius, who established the ghetto in Šiauliai. About 1,000 Jews were murdered before the ghetto, then about 8,000 were imprisoned in that ghetto, their property seized, and all children murdered in the Children's aktion. The 3,000 Jews who survived the Šiauliai ghetto were sent to the Dachau and Stutthof concentration camps. No one knows the exact number of total survivors, it is perhaps somewhere between 200 and 500.

We have been demanding the plaque be removed for many years now.

The street named after Kazys Škirpa in central Vilnius is another matter. Škirpa founded and commanded the extreme fascist organization the Lithuanian Activist Front. They were the authors of Nazi ideology in Lithuania and organized the extermination of all Jewish communities in Lithuania. We have been demanding for many years now the street be renamed. When this finally happened, when Vilnius mayor Remigijus Šimašius did get the street renamed and took down the Noreika plaque, a horrible mess ensued. It seems to have culminated in the rally held yesterday organized by the Conservative Party.

Bearing in mind the experience of the Holocaust, the board of the Lithuanian Jewish Community decided to close the community building and synagogue temporarily, in order to avoid anti-Semitic attacks as much as possible. We have been receiving unpleasant and threatening letters and telephone calls. Some people are receiving the telephone calls at night, every night.

Following our announcement of the closure of the community building and synagogue, the Lithuanian president and prime minister issued public assurances we are safe.

The rally yesterday, August 7, featured personal attacks on me, Faina Kukliansky, and the Lithuanian Jewish Community, attacks echoed by a group of local Jews who are actively spreading rumors about me and the LJC. This is especially regretful because I had hoped these anti-Semitic events would serve to rally our small community together. Incidentally, professor Vytautas Landsbergis, considered the father of modern Lithuanian independence, wrote and posted a poem of his take on recent events which concluded with the offensive ethnic epithet "žydėlka," or Jew-girl, a word in common use by Lithuanian anti-Semites. Below please find extracts from an article about the above-mentioned group of local Jews published in the Lithuanian media.

We are convinced we have acted appropriately in this situation in order to minimize the effects of anti-Semitism. To prevent further complications and misunderstandings, however, we have to make a decision. First, we would like to send letters of thanks to the authorities for their support. Second, shouldn't we be demonstrating that all Jewish organizations are united in this and will never allow the Holocaust to happen again? Glorification of the murderers of the Jews is not acceptable. It might be useful to organize a high-level conference or meeting about the Holocaust in order to educate decision-makers.

Some Jewish organizations opposed to Lithuanian Jewish Community chairwoman Faina Kukliansky have accused her of making inappropriate statements in discussions concerning commemorative signs and called for constructive dialogue.

Vilnius Jewish Community chairman Simonas Gurevičius and his followers say **Kukliansky's statements could incite greater anti-Semitism** among the Lithuanian public.

Kukliansky also accused former head of state Vytautas Landsbergis of anti-Semitism. He claimed he was simply trying to warn people of a [Russian] provocation and to abstain from statements against Jews.

The statement issued Wednesday by the schismatic group said they fully supported "the removal of signs commemorating Nazi collaborators from the public space in Vilnius and Lithuania."

"We regret that extremist forces want to exploit this to divide and sow discord in society, and we also regret that the Lithuanian political elite and leaders have not condemned this with one voice," the dissident statement stated.

They also claimed they felt safe "in Vilnius and throughout Lithuania, although the growth of anti-Semitism concerns us."

"We are in favor of a constructive dialogue between the different groups of Lithuanian citizens. Dialogue and discussions by experts is what contemporary society needs. We also think law-enforcement institutions need to be very attentive and to investigate all instances of ethnic discord and other instances of xenophobia, and to stop them."

...

"We ask everyone to abstain from actions and statements leading to discord, and to use the language of historical arguments when speaking about the painful experience of the 20th century based on Western standards of understanding," the statement said.

Note: Feliksas Puzemskis, the head of the Klaipėda Jewish Community, withdrew his signature from the Gurevičius statement early on Thursday, August 9.

Chairwoman of the Jewish community
of Lithuania

Faina Kukliansky