

EXHIBITION
‘THE RESCUED LITHUANIAN JEWISH CHILD TELLS ABOUT SHOAH’
(DVD presentation)

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After WWII, up to 1948 when anti-Semitism became prevailed in the Soviet Union, the rescue of Jewish people during the Holocaust in Lithuania, as a virtue was repeatedly mentioned in Lithuanian periodicals.

Later, the subject was ignored Jews became ‘Soviet people’ and only in 1967, twenty years after WWII, the book *Unarmed Fighters (Ir be ginklo kariai)* compiled by Sofija Binkienė, a journalist and saviour of Jews was published. The book was a collection of reminiscences, testimonies, documents of the survivors of the war. It would seem that this work should have initiated a comprehensive study of this subject when most of the eye witnesses of the events were still alive. Unfortunately, it did not happen, there were several articles in the periodicals where the facts were described without mentioning people’s names or place names and second-hand testimonies were provided.

Information about rescuers of Jews and survivors has been collected by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum since the re-establishing of the museum in 1989 (after 50 years of non-existence). In 1992, the Righteous Gentiles Department was established. The archives of this department contain authentic testimonies, reminiscences, letters, and photographs of the rescuers of Jews and survivors. As far as it has been possible, the information about the rescue of Jews published in the periodicals has been collected and analysed.

In 1997, the series *Hand Bringing Life and Bread (Gyvybę ir duoną nešančios rankos)* started to be published. The books of the series appeared in 1999, 2005, and the last one – in 2009. The aim of the books was to inform the Lithuanian public about examples of humanism during the Holocaust and those special people who went against the current, against the occupation government, against a large part of public opinion and desire.

In June 2004, a writer living in Israel Icchokas Meras initiated a project called *Rescuers of the Jews – the Righteous Among the Nations*. He gathered a group of volunteers who started looking for survivors in Israel, encouraged them to write their memoirs and to send them to Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem and the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum.

In response to Icchokas Meras’ initiative, a large number of survivors of the war living in various parts of the world (Israel, Lithuania, Canada, Russia, and Australia) wrote to the museum. These people became authors of the museum’s 4th book *Hand Bringing Life and Bread*

and a large number of them also became participants of the exhibition ‘The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah.’

The permanent exhibition “Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah” was opened on 23 September 2009, on the Day of the Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews in the Tolerance Centre of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum.

Our goal was to raise the awareness of the Lithuanian society about the Holocaust. We aimed to appeal to our young generation by creating an opportunity to listen to the stories of the still living people, to read authentic testimonies, to look at old pictures and to feel at least a tiny bit of what the persecuted ones had to endure.

We also wanted to pay homage to the rescuers of Jews – Lithuanian citizens, who showed an exceptional heroism by saving Jews from Nazi genocide during the World War II.

This project was realised with the help of our partners, the creative team of the company Terra Media who are the designers of the exhibition ‘The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah’ and authors of the DVD software.

This DVD contains the comprehensive material of this unique exhibition,

During the realisation of the project, the Righteous Gentiles Department of the museum collected and recorded around 1,800 pages of text material about the survivors and rescuers of Jewish people; around 6,000 photographs; around 60 hours of video material; and five hours of audio recordings. More than a half of this information has been carefully selected and provided for visitors to the museum. The most impressive material was selected for the stands and detailed information is available in the computer terminals.

The content of the DVD ‘The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah’:

- ◆ Historical context. Holocaust in the Nazi-occupied Lithuania in 1941–1944. Chronology of the events;
- ◆ Interactive memorial dedicated to the memory of the Lithuanian Jewish children killed during the Holocaust;
- ◆ Stories of 48 rescued children illustrated with pictures from personal archives and video-interviews of the Holocaust witnesses;
- ◆ Exclusive stories of the rescuers of Jews, illustrated by a large amount of photos and videos; books about the rescuing of Jews; the information about the rescuers, who were awarded; documentaries and video-interviews with the rescuers of Jews.

The aim of my presentation is to introduce the structure of the DVD ‘The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah’, the kind of information and its presentation as well

as to present the contain highlights of the exhibition. The DVD of the exhibition was produced using computer terminal software and retains both the design and content of the exhibition.

Sixty-five years after WWII, it is increasingly difficult to find eye witnesses of the great tragedy of Lithuanian Jews. Thousands of Lithuanian Jews were killed and only a handful survived and they are now of a very respectable age. It is therefore very important that the collected information is systematised, is accessible and may be watched and appreciated not only by the exhibition visitors but also by each person who has looked through the DVD presented.

I'd like to make a detailed presentation of the DVD content using all the possibilities of this lecture.

◆ **Historical context, chronology of events**

The historical context is based on the following articles by Dr. Arūnas Bubnys: 'Holocaust in Nazi Occupied Lithuania between 1941 and 1944', 'Specific Features of the Holocaust in Lithuania', 'Vilnius Ghetto', 'Kaunas Ghetto', and 'Šiauliai Ghetto'. Full texts of the articles are available in the computer terminal of the exhibition and this DVD. The chronology of events is presented at the exhibition on the concrete stands with metal inlays.

This chapter is supplemented with the documentary films *Sunset in Lithuania (Saulėlydis Lietuvoje)* (Part 4), *Étude of Hope (Vilties etiudas)*, and TV programmes *Menorah* produced to commemorate the Day of the Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews and the Great Action of 28-29 October 1941 when around 10,000 people were killed in Kaunas Ghetto. There are also valuable, interesting and important interviews with the poet Alfonsas Bukontas, political scientist Aleksandras Štromas, writer Icchokas Meras, journalist Abraomas Levinas, and Prof. Sara Ginaitė, a Holocaust researcher, prisoner of Kaunas Ghetto and participant of the underground resistance movement.

◆ **Interactive memorial dedicated to the memory of the Lithuanian Jewish children killed during the Holocaust.**

The museum's exhibition "The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah" is dedicated to the memory of Lithuanian Jewish children killed during the Holocaust.

From the exhibition booklet: *Nazi ideology sentenced every Jewish child to death. Before the war, 1.6 million Jewish children lived in the countries occupied by Wehrmacht and Germany's allies. More than one million of these children became the victims of the Nazi planned genocide. Thousands of Jewish children were killed together with their parents during the executions that took place in the territory of Lithuania in the summer and autumn of 1941. The remaining*

children were imprisoned together with the adults in the ghettos established in the cities of Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Švenčionys. Only few of them were meant to survive in the time of never-ending actions of extermination.

The DVD, as does the computer terminal of the exhibition, contains a detailed article by Dr. A. Bubnys about the massacre of Jewish children.

A special highlight of the exhibition is the interactive memorial to commemorate the killed children. The unique installation of light, video and sound designed exclusively for this exhibition interactively involves the visitors. Each guest can pick up a stone and leave it the memorial to honour the dead according to the Jewish tradition. Then a lullaby “Shtiler, Shtiler...” is played. The melody of this song, which is sung to children to this day, was written by a then 11-year-old boy, prisoner of the Vilnius Ghetto, and now a famous pianist Alexander Tamir (Alik Wolkowiski). When you place a stone, the rising wave of light illuminates the the pictures of the killed children displayed on the concrete walls and you will hear the lullaby ‘Shtiller, shtiller’, the melody of which was composed by an eleven-year-old boy, and inmate of Vilnius Ghetto, now the famous pianist Alexander Tamir (Alik Wolkowiski). Many of these children’s photographs are brothers, sisters, and cousins of the employees of the museum or of those who were miraculously saved and who are participants of the exhibition.

◆ **Stories of 48 rescued children illustrated with pictures from personal archives and video-interviews of the Holocaust witnesses.**

Participants of the exhibition, who were children during the war, the survivors being of a respectable age now, live in different parts of the world, the majority in Israel and Lithuania, some in the USA, Russia, and Australia. The Visitor Room of the exhibition contains a stand with acknowledgements and a list of the names of all participants of the exhibition with their current domestic country.

Just before the war the participants in our exhibition were children and lived with their parents in different cities and towns of Lithuania. Surrounded by old photographs of their loved ones and their rescuers, they tell their stories.

At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors encounter the words of Icchokas Meras, a writer living in Israel, and a laureate of the National Prize. These words were first published in the book *Unarmed Fighters (Ir be ginklo kariai)* in 1967. The writer told the story of his survival in the autobiographical short stories *Geltonas Lopas (Yellow Patch)* published in 1960. We can hear the writer’s voice.

We are grateful to the creative team ‘Menorah’ of Lithuanian National TV which filmed and recorded many Holocaust eye witnesses, survivors, and rescuers of Jewish people. The first

Lithuanian documentary film dedicated to the rescuers of Jews and survivors, *Gyvybės Medis* (*The Tree of Life*) (directed by Lilija Kopač, producer Leonora Vasiliauskienė), was produced in 1999. It shows many moving meetings between survivors and their rescuers filmed in Israel and Lithuania, authentic locations here in Lithuania where people hid from persecution. The film uses a lot of archive material.

In 2005, at the initiative of the museum, the first documentary film, *I Leave My Child to You* (*Palieku Tau Savo Vaiką*), was produced; in 2007, the second documentary, *Étude of Hope* (*Vilties etiudas*), was produced about the artist Helene Holzman, Righteous Among the Nations, who lived in Kaunas before the war (both films were directed by Lilija Kopač) and the wartime events in Kaunas. These films were shown in Lithuania, Israel and other countries, translated into English with subtitles in Hebrew. The films can be watched at our exhibition and on this DVD.

The main witnesses of the events described in the documentary *I Leave My Child to You* (*Palieku Tau Savo Vaiką*) are living in Israel Jakov Gurvitch, Jadvyga Laucevičiūtė-Baužienė from Telšiai (died in March 2011), and Telesforas Laucevičius from Panevėžys (the son of Jadvyga's brother Pranas and Jakov's sister Rūta). Telesforas' parents, the Jewish Rūta and the Lithuanian Pranas were shot by the River Virvytė, near Tryškiai, on the last day of the Nazi occupation.

The film was particularly warmly welcomed in Telšiai, where the memories of this tragedy that took place many years ago. Jadvyga Laucevičiūtė-Baužienė from Telšiai was an eye witness of these events. She raised Telesforas, the son of Rūta Gurvičiūtė and Pranas Laucevičius.

Jakov Gurvitch (originally from Telšiai), the main witness of the events shown in the film, takes part in various meetings with citizens of his current living place, the city of Mazkeret Batya in Israel and shows this film on the Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel.

◆ Exclusive stories of the rescuers of Jews are illustrated by a large amount of photos and videos; books about the rescuing of Jews; the information about the rescuers who were awarded; documentaries and video-interview with the rescuers of Jews

'Even the smallest one can do big job', – Ona Šimaitė, a special woman who sacrificed her life for others, said.

In the world in which Auschwitz became a reality, in which people were killed just because they were born Jewish – and this was happening in Lithuania during the Second World War when mass murders of Lithuanian Jews took place in Paneriai, Kaunas 9th Fort, Vidzgiris Forest near Alytus, Kužiai near Šiauliai, forest pits near the majority of Lithuanian cities and towns... in such a world, there were people whose names were inscribed not only in the hearts of the

survivors, but also in the world-famous museum of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Garden of the Righteous, and the Wall of Honour engraved with the names of Lithuanian citizens who rescued Jews in the war. Since 1993, the state of Lithuania has been awarding rescuers of Jews with the Life Saving Cross.

Most rescuers of Jews were ordinary people. Maybe some of them acted according to their religious, ideological or political beliefs. Most of the rescuers were not idealists, they did not plan and were not going to be saviours but the moment came, when they had to make a decision, on which another person's life depended. In most cases the victims themselves, in desperate condition, having escaped from yet another round-up, fire pit, or liquidation of the ghetto, turned to their acquaintances, and often to total strangers, asking them to provide vital assistance.

However, in those days of chaos, violence and mass murder, there were very brave and determined people who could no longer watch what was going on around and instead looked for ways to help save at least a few lives. Such behaviour is very important and cannot be compared to even very important assistance granted in normal peaceful conditions. These people were not affected by Nazi propaganda. We have dedicated 20 stands to these outstanding rescuers of Jewish people in our new exhibition.

These include Rev. Juozas Stakauskas, the monastery helper Bronius Gotautas, librarian of Vilnius University Ona Šimaitė, journalist Sofía Binkienė, artist Helene Holzman, Rev. Bronius Paukštys, Rev. Polikarpas Macijauskas, doctor Peter Girbudas, farmer Alfonsas Songaila, doctors Kutorgienė Elena and her son Viktoras Kutorga, doctor Petras Baublys, writer Sofía Čiurlionienė and her daughter Danutė with her husband Vladimiras Zubovas, Marija Fedecka from Vilnius, families of the farmers Straupiai and Rakevičiai, and many others. It should be noted that during the three years of the war many families of farmers shared their last bit of bread with Jews sentenced to death by Nazis.

Two participants of the exhibition originating from Telšiai, Jakov Gurvitch and Jehoshua Shochot (emigrated to Israel around 1970) testify about the inhabitants of Kalnėnų Village, Buožėnų Village, and Vygantiškių village:

From the testimony by Jehoshua Shochot and Jakov Gurvitch:

Both of us, Jehoshua Shochot and Jakov Gurvitch, went on a very similar path to survival and escape from death. We both were confined in the Rainiai and Geruliai concentration camps and the Telšiai ghetto and since the end of December 1941 right up to the liberation in October 1944 we were in dozens of villages and peasant families who hid us, fed us, and gave us shelter and comfort.

We would like to mention three villages, Kalnėnai, Vygantiškiai and Buožėnai, that are close to each other, about 4-5 kilometres north of Telšiai. The majority of the residents of these villages used to hide the Jews on their farms or help the escaped Jews who were looking for

shelter. Each peasant of these villages would open the door of his house to the persecuted whoknocked.

At Jehoshua Shochot's request, the Life Saviour's Cross was awarded to 27 people from Telšiai and Plungė Districts and the town of Telšiai who rescued Jehoshua, his brother Chaim, and their mother Reizl Shochot. In 2006, 14 rescuers of the Shochot family were recognised as the Righteous among the Nations.

Between 2005 and 2006, 13 rescuers of Yakov Gurvitch were recognised as the Righteous among the Nations at Yad Vashem, and many were awarded the Life Saviour's Cross.

I would like to finish this presentation by quoting Dr. Mordecai Paldiel, former longevous director of the Yad Vashem Department of the Righteous:

I should like to point out the importance of these Holocaust rescuers, recognized by Yad Vashem as "Righteous Among the Nations", as a therapeutic antidote to the unhealed wounds of the Holocaust. These knights of the spirit represent an affirmation of life – contra death; their stories – a tool to want us to go on and hope, rather than despair.

It is a very important part of our history, the history of Lithuania. We hope that museum's exhibition 'The Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah' and the DVD will serve as an important educational resource.