



# **METHODICAL MATERIALS**

## **“HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION IN THE BALTICS”**

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These materials were elaborated within the framework of a project of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia, carried out with the generous support of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and The Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund.



# Contents

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**Introduction** ..... 4

**Holocaust in the Baltics: an Overview** ..... 5

*Milda Jakulytė-Vasil*  
Lithuania..... 5

*Aivars Stranga*  
Latvia..... 8

*Olev Liivik*  
Estonia..... 11

**Commemorating the Holocaust: Case Studies** ..... 13

*Milda Jakulytė-Vasil*  
Lithuania. Marking 75th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania:  
Biržai, Molėtai and Šeduva ..... 13

*Didzis Bērziņš, Paula Opper mann*  
Latvia. The Rumbula Memorial. History and Present ..... 20

*Olev Liivik*  
Estonia. Establishment and Evolution of the Klooga Holocaust Memorial..... 32

**Bibliography** ..... 40

**Authors**..... 42

# Introduction

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The Center for Judaic Studies functions as a separate unit affiliated to the University of Latvia. The main activities of the Center are preserving the legacy of Latvian Jews, as well as promoting and maintaining the positive development of Latvian-Jewish relations by means of accurate research and various educational projects. The activities are carried out based on interdisciplinary principles, in collaboration with a large number of teachers, educators and experts from Latvia, the neighboring countries (Lithuania, Russian Federation etc.) and Israel. The Centre is also a key tertiary institution for education and research related to the Holocaust.

These methodical materials were elaborated within the framework of a project of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia, carried out with the generous support of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and The Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund.

By demonstrating regional and national contexts of Holocaust remembrance and giving appropriate tools for Holocaust commemoration, we hope to raise awareness and provide an impulse to active engagement in its commemoration.

# Holocaust in the Baltics: an Overview

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*Milda Jakulytė-Vasil*

## *Lithuania*

The history of the Jews of Lithuania extends back over 600 years. The appearance of the first Jewish communities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania should be associated with military conquests grand duke Gediminas made in the southern lands of the Rus; Volhynia, attached to the Grand Duchy in 1340, already had working Jewish communities. Later Jewish settlement and expansion of the communities came in several waves of migration from Europe in the west. After Lithuanian grand duke Alexander lifted his ban on Jews in 1503 and allowed them to return to the Grand Duchy, expansion of the communities accelerated. The intensity of Jewish settlement within the current territory of Lithuania then was only surpassed in the first part of the 18th century, when, to revive the especially depressed economies of the towns and villages due to demographic attrition and political collapse, Jews were granted special rights by the owners of towns to settle there. By the end of the 17th century there was not less than 250,000 Jews living in the Grand Duchy. It's believed the Jewish population in the joint Polish-Lithuanian state was the largest in Europe, and the largest in the world beginning in the mid-18th century.

At the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century Lithuania, and especially Vilnius, became a center for all sorts of Jewish social and political organizations and movements, and was an important European and world center of Jewish religious learning and teaching. These included the YIVO, the Yung-Vilne literary and arts group, the PEN club, *di Vilner trupe* drama theater, and many Jewish educational, cultural, political, youth, welfare and sports organizations. When Lithuanian independence was declared in 1918, Jews were the second largest ethnic community in the country. According to the census of 1923, 153,000 Jews lived in Lithuania (comprising 7.6% of the population not including the Vilnius region). Most lived in rural locations.

The treaty and secret annexes between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany sealed Lithuania's fate from 1939 to 1940. On June 15, 1940, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. Initially it seemed to satisfy some aspirations by some Jews (the lesser of evils, and perhaps even salvation from impending Nazi occupation and persecution of Jews). According to the Statistics Agency of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, 208,437 Jews lived in the LSSR on January 1, 1941 (constituting 6.86% of the total population including the Vilnius region, Jewish refugees from Poland included). A rapid sovietization of Lithuania followed occupation. Jews were harmed in terms of social and financial standing by the nationalization of industrial enterprises (57% of which

belonged to Jews), large shops (83% Jewish) and banks, as well as the confiscation of personal savings. All Jewish organizations were banned and publication of newspapers in Yiddish was stopped. The network of Hebrew schools was replaced by teaching in Yiddish, and the total number of schools dropped.

Sovietization engendered great losses for all ethnic groups in Lithuania including Jews. From 1940 to 1941 a total of 2,613 Jews suffered direct state persecution (accounting for about 9% of all people suffering direct persecution by the state at the time). Among these, 1,600 people were deported (accounting for 14% of total deportees) and 385 were political prisoners (10% of political prisoners).

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the USSR and Lithuania was completely overrun within a week. The Red Army beat a retreat, followed by Soviet officials and civilians, including Jews. There was an insurgency against the Soviets timed to coincide with the Nazi invasion, from June 23 to 26, 1941. Armed gangs of Lithuanians attacked, kidnapped and murdered Jewish civilians. The Nazi puppet government called the Provisional Government was proclaimed over the radio in Kaunas on June 23, constituted of people selected earlier at headquarters in Berlin. On July 17 the Baltic states and part of Byelorussia were proclaimed the Ostland kommissariat by the Nazis. Lithuania with its seat at Kaunas became the "general area" of the Ostland kommissariat.

The mass murder of Jews began in Kaunas and in Lithuanian areas bordering German East Prussia during the first days of the invasion. The scope of the Holocaust in Lithuania increased in July with continual mass murder operations set up, first in Kaunas.

Stages in the persecution and extermination of Jews:

- 1. End of June, early July, 1941.** Jews arrested and shot on the pretext of being Communists, Soviet officials and proponents of Soviet Communism. Mainly males targeted.
- 2. Second half of July to November, 1941.** Jews arrested and murdered without the pretext of political motivation based on their ethnicity. Initially temporary ghettos and holding camps were set up. Almost all Jews in rural locations in Lithuania were murdered during this period. August and September saw the highest murder rates. Frequently mass murder operations were carried out only several kilometers away from the ghetto or holding site, usually at a prepared location in forests or fields. The major actors in the mass murder of Lithuania's rural Jews were Haman's flying squadron, the Special Unit based in Vilnius and local administrations, police and volunteers, the latter three of whom were involved in all stages of the Holocaust.
- 3. December, 1941, to March, 1943.** This period could be called provisionally the period of stabilization, when mass murder operations were no longer being carried out. During this period the Jews imprisoned in the ghettos (Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Vilnius district ghettos) performed a variety of work at ghetto workshops, factories and other enterprises, and at specially equipped Jewish labor camps. In April, 1943, the German Sicherheitsdienst and SD director in Lithuania reported there were 44,584 Jews left in the Lithuanian "general

area:" 23,950 in the Vilnius ghetto, 15,875 in the Kaunas ghetto and 4,759 in the Šiauliai ghetto.

- 4. April, 1943, to July, 1944.** The liquidation of ghettos began in the spring of 1943. Mainly because of the partisan resistance, the ghettos in the Vilnius district were liquidated first. In March of 1943 the Švenčionys, Mikailiškės, Ašmena and Salos ghettos were liquidated. In July the satellite work camps of the Vilnius ghetto were liquidated. The liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto in stages began in August of 1943. The final and complete liquidation took place September 23. The ghettos in Kaunas and Šiauliai continued to exist in the fall of 1943 and were turned into concentration camps under the authority of the SS in October of the same year. As the front approached Kaunas in 1944, the Nazis decided to completely liquidate the concentration camps. The liquidation of the Kaunas ghetto was carried out from July 8 to 12; on August 1 the Red Army occupied Kaunas. The liquidation of Šiauliai ghetto began July 15, 1944.

In summer and fall of 1941, rural Lithuanian Jews were led under Nazi orders by local police, prison staff, white armbanders and volunteers, shot and left in about 250 pits located near their homes in forests, old Jewish cemeteries and fields. Approximately 120,000 Jews were murdered over a four-week period from the end of August to the end of September, 1941. The mass murder reached its zenith on October 29, 1941, when Nazis and Lithuanians shot almost 10,000 Lithuanian Jews in one day at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas. About 80% of Lithuanian Jews had been exterminated by the end of 1941. At the end of 1941 Jews were deported from Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia to Lithuania to be murdered. In May of 1944 trains of Jews from France arrived in Lithuania.

Successful implementation of Nazi policy was impossible with the support of the Lithuanian administration and a relatively large proportion of Lithuanian agencies and civilians collaborated with the Nazis.

## *Latvia*

From its beginning, the Jewish community in Latvia was not homogeneous. Jews, who immigrated to Latvia, came from different regions and were separated by substantial differences. First Jews settled in Courland (western part of Latvia) in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Latgale (eastern part of Latvia) first Jews settled in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, but in Riga the Jewish community started forming only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Jews of Courland were more affected by German culture, whereas Jews of Latgale were Russian or Yiddish speaking and more religious.

The establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia (1918-1940) accelerated the process of forming united Jewish community. For the first time in many centuries, Jewish community could develop freely. Jewish economic and cultural activity expanded enormously. Jews were also actively involved in politics and represented in the Latvian Parliament. A well-developed network of Jewish schools, with over 100 institutions, was formed. Jews were represented in all social and economic classes. In 1935, 93'479 Jews lived in Latvia, making up 4,79 % of the overall population.

In June 1940 the Soviet Union occupied Latvia. As a result, the destruction of the Jewish community began. Jewish religious and educational institutions were shut down, Jewish political key figures were arrested. Among the 14'428 Latvian citizens deported to Siberia on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1941 about 1'789 were Jewish.

In June and July 1941, following the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Germans occupied Latvia. In Latvia the murdering of Jews started already on the next day after the German invasion, although, mass-scale extermination of Jews began a few weeks later. In order to launch it, the Germans needed at least two things: first, the power system of the occupation had to be created and consolidated; second, the participation of the local population in the preparation of the extermination of Jews (the local Latvian administration was commanded to register all Jews residing in the respective administrative territory) and in the massacre (the-so-called Latvian self-defence and special Latvian SD units were formed) had to be secured.

The key role in the annihilation of Jews was assigned to four special groups of the Security Service – SD groups – Einsatzgruppe (EG). It should be emphasised that all forces and institutions of German occupation were in this or that way involved in the Holocaust. Units of the German army – Wehrmacht (especially those of field commandant's office Feldkommandantur), marine corps and police of all types, including police battalions and civilian police, also took part in the Holocaust. The Civilian Administration of the occupation was likewise engaged in the organisation and implementation of the extermination of Jews.

The main units that murdered Jews in the province were: German SD groups, Latvian SD units commanded by Viktors Arājs and Mārtiņš Vagulāns and local Latvian self-defence groups.



Jews residing in the province – in small Latvian towns – were the first to fall victim to the mass-scale extermination. By mid-August, a large part of the Jewish population of Latvian provinces had been killed while in Zemgale region all Jews had been annihilated.

Extermination of the absolute majority of the Latvian Jewish population fell into two phases. The first one was the-so-called Einsatzgruppen period when murders were led, organised and at least partially carried out by Einsatzgruppen and the commanders of its sub-units. It lasted from July to the end of August 1941 and in this period several thousand Jews were killed in Biķernieki forest in Riga and practically the entire Jewish population in the province was annihilated, the total number of victims in this phase constituting approximately 30'000 people. However, in Liepāja, Daugavpils and Aizpute the killing of Jews still proceeded in September and October and, compared to the summer, a respite set in by November.

In the second phase on the 30th of November and 8th of December, approximately 24'000 Jewish residents of Riga and 1'000 Jews transferred there from Germany fell victim to the Rumbula massacre. Only about 6'000 Jewish residents of Latvia survived Rumbula; their lives were spared in order to use their labour. Starting with February 1942, able-bodied Jews between 16 and 32 were spared their lives and herded in what had remained of the Riga Ghetto (the so-called Small Ghetto) and later transferred to several concentration camps from where, starting from late summer 1944, the survivors were deported to camps in Germany. Simultaneously with the murder of Riga Jews in Rumbula, trainloads with Jews from the Reich started arriving in the occupied Latvia to be killed there. The majority of deportees were murdered in Biķernieki right away without even transferring them to the ghetto; a part of the deportees were taken to Auschwitz death camp and killed there in November 1943. Of the Latvian Jews and of those deported to Latvia only 1'182 persons survived. Total annihilation of Jews both in the territory of occupied Latvia and elsewhere went on until the defeat of the Nazi Germany in May 1945.

The same conditions – the German occupation – provoked opposite behavior in different people: the absolute minority saved Jews at the risk of their own lives (saving of Jews was punishable with death in the occupied Latvia). Under the same conditions another minority killed Jews while the absolute majority of the population were bystanders. The local residents took part in the extermination of Jews and in the related activities in different ways: the first in the line, of course, were the direct murderers; their responsibility and crime is indisputable. Close to them in this regard stand those who did not shoot themselves, but who guarded the doomed Jews and conducted them to the site of murder. Others were involved in the registration of Jews only. Others – often under compulsion – dug graves and covered them after the massacre or guarded the victims' belongings. Still others registered the belongings of the executed ones (who in rather many cases had been their neighbours with whom the perpetrators had lived side by side for many decades), distributed and appropriated it: these people belonged to the largest group of the population. While the number of direct murderers constituted a few hundred in 1941, almost anyone who had the chance took part in the appropriation of the victims' belongings, without the slightest sense of shame or

moderation. Clearly, the Germans themselves pocketed the most valuable things, yet nothing that remained was slighted and the commandant's offices of the Latvian self-defence played a great role in the appropriation of the Jews' property.

The total number of victims may thus constitute 90'000. The following categories of Jews perished in Latvia:

1. up to 70'000 native Latvian Jews who had remained in Latvia at the beginning of the Nazi occupation;
2. approximately 20'000 Jews transferred from the Reich (Germany, Austria and Bohemia) during the Nazi occupation and Jewish women from Hungary (deported to Latvia in the summer of 1944);
3. more than 1'000 Jews from Lithuania who had fled to Latvia in late June 1941 or were deported to Rīga Ghetto and later transferred to the Kaiserwald Concentration Camp in late 1941 and early 1944.

The total extermination of the Jews and the annihilation of Latvia's Jewish community both in the territory of Latvia and beyond its borders went on until the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. Although the largest part of the territory of Latvia fell into the hands of the Red Army already in the autumn of 1944, German occupation persisted in much of the Kurzeme region of Western Latvia until as late as early May 1945. The Holocaust ended only after the capitulation of Germany.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Text is partially published in: Stranga A. Holocaust in the German-Occupied Latvia: 1941-1945.// *Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Volume 23: Problems of the Holocaust Research in Latvia*. Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2008.

## *Estonia*

Although the history of Jews in Estonia dates back to the Middle Ages, the formation of a permanent Jewish settlement in the territory of the present Estonian Republic began only in the first half of the 19th century. Until then numerous regulations restricted free movement and place of residence of Jews and hindered their continuous residence in Estonia. Consistent formation of Jewish communities was directly linked to the Russian army legislation of 1827 that for the first time forced Jews to enter military service. Consequently a number of Jews were conscripted into the military service; these, the so-called Cantonists or Nicholas soldiers, named after Tsar Nicholas I, arrived to Estonia. Later these young men became the founders of the real Jewish communities and Jewish congregations in major towns – first in Tallinn in 1830 and then in Tartu in 1866. By the outbreak of World War I the Jewish population had already reached 5,000.

After the creation of the Republic of Estonia in 1918 the Jewish community flourished. In difference to the majority of countries in the Eastern and Central Europe, anti-Semitism was marginal in Estonian society. The Estonian Constitution adopted in 1920 allowed ethnic minorities to establish autonomous institutions to engage in cultural and educational activities. When the Estonian Parliament adopted the law on cultural autonomy for national minorities in 1925, the creation of Jewish cultural autonomy followed in 1926. Enjoying the autonomy in their cultural life, the number of Jewish societies and associations began to grow. Moreover, the Jewish community overcame the rivalry between Tallinn and Tartu, which was aimed at gaining the leading role in the life of Estonian Jewry. Nevertheless the Jewish community remained heterogeneous. In particular, disputes over language were dividing the community. The larger Jewish organisations, dominated mostly by the Hebraists, wanted to introduce the biblical Hebrew as the language of instruction in Jewish schools, although the majority of Estonian Jewish population had, in fact, Yiddish as their mother tongue. Hence there was a Jewish Gymnasium (secondary school) in Tallinn, where the biblical Hebrew and Yiddish coexisted. During the interwar period a secondary school in Tartu and an elementary school in Valga operated alongside the Jewish Gymnasium in Tallinn. Despite flourishing of culture, the number of Jews slightly decreased, which could be explained by the Jewish emigration to Palestine. According to the census of 1934, however, there were 4,381 Jews living in Estonia (0.4 per cent of the population), mostly in towns.

With the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940 the Jewish cultural autonomy was liquidated immediately. Within a following couple of months all Jewish organisations, associations and societies were closed. Eventually a large group of Jews (more than 400, or 10% of the entire Jewish population) were deported to the Soviet Union on 14 June 1941. As the war between the Soviet Union and Germany began, about 3,000 Jews fled from Estonia to the Soviet Union. The remaining Jews, approximately 1,000 people, were arrested under the orders of the German Security Police by the end of 1941. Only a few

individuals managed to go in hiding until the end of the war. All captured Jews were executed by early 1942. In order to make the extermination look legal, the Estonian police officers drew up formal investigation files, although ethnicity was enough to warrant an execution.

With the extermination of Estonian Jews the first phase of the Holocaust came to end. In a report by the Chief of the German Security Police Forces in the Baltic countries, dated 31 January 1942, Estonia was declared to be "Judenfrei".

The second phase of the Holocaust lasted for about two years, from autumn 1942 till the end of summer 1944. Within this period about 12,500 Jews were transported to Estonia. In September 1942, approximately 1,000 Jews from the Terezíni (Theresienstadt) ghetto in the Czech Republic arrived by train at Raasiku station in the vicinity of Tallinn. Shortly after approximately the same number of Jewish deportees arrived there from Frankfurt am Main and Berlin. Four to five hundred younger deportees from both echelons were selected and taken to Jägala camp near Tallinn. The rest, about 1,600 people, were executed by the German and the Estonian camp staff in mass-shootings on the very day of their arrival at the Kalevi-Liiva polygon, located close to Raasiku. When the Jägala camp was disbanded in 1943, the Jewish prisoners were sent to various other camps. At least 74 of these survived the war. In June 1944 about 300 men from the Drancy transit camp in France (the so-called 73rd convoy) were transported to Tallinn, most of them were killed. Only 34 survivors were taken to Stutthof concentration camp in September 1944.

Merely one year before that the notorious Vaivara concentration camp had been established. KL Vaivara consisted of more than 20 labour camps. In operation from August 1943 to September 1944, it accommodated some 10,000 Jews deported in 1943 from the ghettos of Lithuania and Latvia, but some also from Hungary in 1944. Nearly one-third of the inmates of the KL Vaivara died in Estonia as a result of the severe conditions, or of being deemed unfit for work and then being sent to extermination camps outside Estonia. Another third were murdered as the camps were closed down in 1944. Among them were nearly 2000 victims of mass murder committed on September 19, 1944, in Klooga, a branch of the KL Vaivara, located approximately 40 Kilometres from Tallinn. The rest of the inmates were evacuated in August 1944 to Stutthof concentration camp or managed to survive from massacre in Klooga (approximately 100 people). All in all in the period from 1942 to 1944 nearly 7,000 Jews were deported from Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, the Czech Republic, France and Hungary perished in Estonia. Thus, the total number of Jews who died or were murdered in Estonia during the war reached 8,000 people.

As regards the attitude of the ordinary Estonians toward the fate of the Jews, they remained mostly indifferent. However, the involvement of local residents neither in the captures, nor in the murders of Jews has been proved. In some cases, however, it is known that Estonians supported or even rescued Jewish people.

# Commemorating the Holocaust: Case Studies

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*Milda Jakulytė-Vasil*

## *Marking 75th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania: Biržai, Molėtai and Šeduva*

### **The Holocaust Remembrance in Lithuania**

Only a few of the once numerous Lithuanian Jewish communities survived the war and the Holocaust. The main aims of the community after the war were restoring organizational structures and religious life, finding orphans hidden during the war, putting mass graves in order and commemorating Holocaust victims. *Zakhor* (Hebrew, *to remember*) became a key feature of the identity of most Soviet Lithuanian Jews, whatever their relationship with religion and Yiddish, whatever their political or ideological views. Some Jews felt it was their moral obligation to assemble at mass murder sites at least once a year. Soviet security forces took great care to prevent ritual Holocaust victim commemorations crossing over the boundaries of the permissible. Memory became a significant stimulus for the younger generation of Jewish writers working in Lithuanian and Russian (the most renowned being Icchokas Meras and Grigory Kanovitch). A thaw in policy was indicated in the publication of memoirs by ghetto partisans and revealing the scale and singularity of the Holocaust. The genocide of the Jews was not part of Soviet Lithuania's educational curriculum nor of Lithuania's historical identity. Memory of the Holocaust, with its tremendous scale, atrocities and barbaric anti-Semitism, remained exclusive to the Jews in Soviet Lithuania.

In 1990 there were about 152 mass murder sites in the country marked with monuments. Today 224 monuments stand watch over the killing sites.

New Holocaust studies are being carried out by Lithuanian historians working at the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, the Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of the Residents of Lithuania and by the International Commission to Assess the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupational Regimes in Lithuania. Several hours are dedicated to Holocaust education at Lithuanian schools as part of lessons about World War II.

The Day of Remembrance of the Lithuanian Jewish Victims of Genocide was listed on the official list of state holidays by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Lithuania on October 31, 1990. Since 1994 it has been marked annually. Since 2009 International Holocaust Remembrance Day has been observed in Lithuania. There are observances of Yom ha Shoah, the Israeli day of Holocaust commemoration which falls

in early spring, and during which the March of the Living event takes place at Ponar near Vilnius, the largest mass murder site in Lithuania.

As stated, there are three main Holocaust commemorative days in Lithuania: September 23, January 27 and Yom ha'Shoah on a moveable date in spring according to the Jewish calendar. Besides these dates, every Lithuanian town has its own day to commemorate, the date the town's Jewish community was murdered, and sometimes several different dates for the same town. The densest period of commemoration would be from the end of June to November when over 80 percent of the Jews of Lithuania were murdered, a period during which almost every day could feature a commemoration in some town.

Since about 2010 the public has taken a noticeably greater interest in the Holocaust and various grass-roots efforts have popped up to commemorate the victims. One of the larger stimuli towards public Holocaust commemoration happened in 2011 when that year was declared the Year of the Defense of Freedom and of Great Losses. Despite the declaration 2011 wasn't an especially active time and everything involved official commemorations in specific municipalities. The first non-governmental, civic Holocaust commemoration happened on September 23, 2011, at St. Catherine's Church (not an active church and used as a concert hall) in Vilnius when the names of Holocaust victims were read aloud from early morning later into the evening. This was an initiative by city residents who wanted to remember Holocaust victims "without the bureaucracy". Over several years the initiative grew with people who read the names in Vilnius bringing the event to their hometowns. In 2014 citizen Holocaust initiatives were held at 9 locations and in 2016 in 22 cities and towns. There were other ways Holocaust commemorations took place as well. These were usually initiated by children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, some resident in Lithuania, some living abroad. This small community held these commemorations in private and without publicity.

The 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania was marked in 2016. There were especially many commemoration events held. These included the usual: official ceremonies in Ponar, a conference in the Lithuanian parliament and a ceremony to give awards to families who rescued Jews during World War II at the Lithuanian President's Office. Also for the first time in Lithuania German artist Gunter Deming's "memory stones" were unveiled in Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Panevėžys in front of buildings where Jewish and Roma citizens lived.<sup>2</sup> New monuments were unveiled in several locations including Dusetos to remind the public of the local murdered Jewish community. Even so, smaller and even larger commemorations were held in many locations in separate towns. Biržai, Molėtai and Šeduva were several such towns which will be discussed below.

### **Biržai**

On the last Sunday of summer the 75th anniversary of the mass murder of the Jews of the town of Biržai was remembered. In one day the town lost more than 2,000 of its

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<sup>2</sup> <http://manoteises.lt/straipsnis/lietuva-prisijungia-prie-didziausio-europos-memorialo-po-atviru-dangumi-2/>

residents. On August 8, 1941, almost all the Jews of Biržai were murdered in the Pakamponys Forest: 900 children, 720 men and 780 women, totaling 2,400 people.<sup>3</sup>

The survivors from the formerly large Jewish community from the very end of the war and for many years without interruption met annually to remember their murdered family members. By common consent the annual event took place on the last Sunday of summer. This year was no exception in terms of date, but nonetheless was much more public than in earlier years and the general public was invited to walk in a procession to honor the memory of their murdered fellow citizens. Events in the regions of this scale are unusual and this was partially due to public interest in the procession in Molėtai (see below). Many came to the event, including descendants of Jews of Biržai who came to remember family members, representatives of different Jewish communities from around Lithuania, Israeli ambassador Amir Maimon, US embassy chargé d'affaires ad interim Howard Solomon who has family roots in Biržai, Brooklyn synagogue president and retired US Navy chaplain Rabbi Marvin Schneider, but also local town residents and people from other Lithuanian cities and towns.



*Biržai, in 2016 and 1966. The same people in the same place. Sofija Tabakina.*

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a\\_atlas/search//page/1/item/149/](http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a_atlas/search//page/1/item/149/)

Participants were invited to take part in the procession, but also to visit the Jewish section of the town to take in the most important town community locations and buildings with a narrative from historians. The procession passed the old Biržai Jewish cemetery where the first victims of the Holocaust in town were murdered. The procession continued on to the mass murder site in Pakamponys Forest. The entire route from the town center to the mass murder site was lined with 2,400 burning candles, the same number as the number of victims.

Event organizers and others spoke to attendees in Pakamponys. The others included grandchildren of survivors who have taken over organization of the event from their parents and grandparents, those honored for rescuing Jews, the Israeli ambassador, the chairwoman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community and people from the USA. Archbishop Lionginas Virbalas spoke movingly. He grew up in Biržai and said not everyone in his age-group knows the history of the Jews of Biržai. They weren't just people, they had faces and names and played violin and went to synagogue, where they looked out on that same Lake Širvena, he said. The archbishop said everyone in the area knew these kind of people lived here but no one has looked more deeply into the tragedy which overtook them. He said the word tolerance doesn't cover the problem which the world today has inherited. People understand the world at the present time has more newer tragedies, but we must learn the lessons which we received in World War II when our Lithuanian brothers exterminated their Jewish neighbors and stole their property, he said.<sup>4</sup>

### **Molėtai**

A group of men wearing white armbands were told they would have to shoot Jews on August 29, 1941. First about 180 16-45-year-old males were placed in a column and marched to a pit. They were ordered to undress to their underwear and climb into the pit. A German officer then ordered the white armbanders to shoot the men lying prone. The mass murder of the Jews continued for 4 to 5 hours. Exact figures are unknown. The Jäger report lists 3,782 Jews murdered in Utena and Molėtai on August 29, 1941, but doesn't break the figure down by town. According to witness testimonies, from 700 to 1,200 Jewish men, women and children were murdered in Molėtai.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of 2015 a descendant of Molėtai Jews living in Israel decided to organize an observance of the 75th anniversary of the mass murder and so honor the memory of his murdered relatives. All Jews who had once lived in Molėtai and their offspring around the world were invited to the observance. The idea was to walk the same route their family members were marched along to the mass murder site 75 years earlier.

Local resident and writer Marius Ivaškevičius learned about the planned event and publicized it. He invited Lithuanians to come and walk the same route. "You don't have to do anything, just walk, several kilometers from the town of Molėtai, together with our Jews. To be silent together, to look one another in the eye. I have no doubt someone will

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.siaure.lt/main/turinys/naujienos/1/15269>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a\\_atlas/search//page/1/item/13/](http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a_atlas/search//page/1/item/13/)



start crying because such moments are moving. Someone from among us and someone from among them. And that's enough. Just that, to show them and ourselves that we are no longer enemies."<sup>6</sup>



*Participants of the commemoration event in Molėtai. M. Jakulytė-Vasil.*

Ivaškevičius says he lived in ignorance for 40 years, not knowing and not intuiting the gigantic tragedy on whose margin he lives. "To know that 200,000 Jews have been murdered is one thing, but does that affect you emotionally in some way? I knew that (I'm not so ignorant), but until you comprehend it, until empathy begins to work, until you become in some sense the victims in your imagination, until you experience the tragedy, you are apathetic,"<sup>7</sup> Ivaškevičius, who was born in Molėtai, wrote. After making the initial invitation to the Lithuanian public and political elite to attend the Molėtai procession, he wrote "I'm Not Jewish" in summer of 2016, detailing his path to understanding the history of his native town, where two-thirds of the population were murdered on August 29, 1941. "I'm not Jewish, I am a Lithuanian, and I know we can do this, to demonstrate our power and unity. To recognize our mistakes and even crimes is a sign of strength, not weakness."<sup>8</sup>

Ivaškevičius's statement caused a storm in the media and social networks and many Lithuanian intellectuals decided to attend the procession. Transportation was provided for people from other cities and towns to attend. More than 2,000 people did attend from a number of Lithuanian locations and from other countries, including Lithuanian politicians, MPs, ministers and the mayor of Molėtai.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lzb.lt/en/2016/05/19/jews-lithuanias-misfortune/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://kultura.lrytas.lt/istorija/izraelio-mokslinike-ir-lietuviu-rasytojas-apie-moletu-tragedija.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lzb.lt/en/2016/09/09/im-not-jewish/>

## Šeduva

A temporary Jewish ghetto was set up at the airport in Šeduva in July, 1941. On August 25 and 26, over two days, 664 Jews (230 men, 275 women and 159 children) were murdered in Liaudiškiai Forest under Nazi orders. Local police and white armbanders committed the mass murder.<sup>9</sup>



*Commemoration event in Šeduva. A. Baltenas, Šeduva Jewish Memorial Fund.*

The Šeduva Jewish Memorial Foundation has been carrying out work to commemorate the Jews of Šeduva since 2012.<sup>10</sup> The foundation's work began with renovation of the old Jewish cemetery, the 3 Holocaust sites in Šeduva and other projects. A commemorative event was held August 30, 2016, to mark the 75th anniversary of the murder of the Jews of Šeduva. Descendants of Jews of Šeduva living in England and Israel and a large number of local residents attended. Foundation founder and commemorative event organizer Sergejus Kanovičius says he follows this principle of commemoration: "Memory can't live if it's only rekindled when flags with black ribbons are raised and lowered and the microphones are turned on. Memory, like national borders, must be vigilantly and continually protected. It is living if it is tended daily. Otherwise, like a fallow field, it becomes choked with weeds, and like a poorly protected national border, and an oblivion which relieves us of any and all responsibility creeps through it."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a\\_atlas/search//page/1/item/244/](http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a_atlas/search//page/1/item/244/)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lostshtetl.com>

<sup>11</sup> <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/society/unique-jewish-heritage-site-opens-in-seduva.d?id=68090032;>  
<http://delfi.lt>

Attendees were invited to visit the Jewish mass murder sites about 10 kilometers outside town. When they returned participants attended a mass at the Šeduva church for all the Jews of Šeduva murdered during the Nazi occupation, after which Rafailas Karpis gave a concert of songs in Yiddish. Bishop of Šiauliai Eugenijus Bartulis delivered a homily during the mass and priests from neighboring parishes participated.

One of the important aspects of the event was participation by local residents. They are the primary guardians of the memory of the tragedy of their town. The church filled with Šeduva residents demonstrated the people of the town are ready to accept their history and the word of the bishop who quoted St. Paul in his Letter to the Colossians: "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all." One might paraphrase: no longer are we Lithuanian or Jew, the tragedy of the Jews of Lithuania is our tragedy.

The case studies presented here are important examples of how society at the grass-roots is not only capable of, but does do something about its concerns, and talks about painful matters without following in the footsteps of political leaders. These examples show there is a group which has formed in society who see official Holocaust commemoration and projects initiated by state institutions as inappropriate. For this group of people, which is daily growing (to judge from events which have happened, the number of events and announcements of future events), it is important to do something because they care, and the events and commemorations they initiate are much more public, open, effective and, most importantly, relevant.

## *The Rumbula Memorial. History and Present.*

On November 30th and December 8th 1941, German occupants and Latvian collaborators killed approximately 25000 Jewish men, women, and children in the forest of Rumbula in the southeast of Riga. It was the biggest mass shooting of Jews on Latvian soil and is known until today as one of the most tragic chapters of Holocaust history in Nazi occupied Latvia.

For nearly two decades after the war the mass graves remained in the state the Germans had left them. In 1961 a group of Latvian Jews initiated the installation of a memorial, which was inaugurated in October 1964. Bearing a Yiddish inscription, the memorial implied that Jews had been victims of the massacre. This made Rumbula different from most monuments built at the time of the Soviet rule. The regime restricted Jewish life and culture and the Jewish Holocaust was generally not presented within the official commemoration of the Second World War.

Why was it possible to erect the memorial at this time? Who was involved and what motives did the activists have? How did the Soviet regime react? How did the attitude towards the memorial change after the collapse of the Soviet Union? And finally, how is commemoration in Rumbula organized since Latvia regained its independence? Knowledge about the memorial's history and its present will serve to understand the development of Holocaust Commemoration in Latvia and its current impact upon the country.

### **The Holocaust in Latvia and the Rumbula Massacre**

Rumbula gained notoriety as the scene of the biggest mass execution on Latvian territory during the time of German occupation. In the months preceding the massacre, the Nazis had already eradicated Jewish life all over the country: mobile killing squads killed Jews of both genders and all ages, including children. They were supported by local collaborators. The majority of the non-Jewish population largely did not speak out against the crimes. Only few neighbours risked their lives and tried to save Jews, and many enriched themselves by taking Jewish property.

From the first days of occupation German perpetrators and their local collaborators began to systematically kill communists and partisans, as well as Jews from Latvia and the territories of the German Reich in the forest of Biķernieki near Riga. After the first wave of killings in the summer of 1941, the German administration decided to concentrate the remaining Jews of the three big cities Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja in ghettos in order to control them, to take possession of their property and to exploit them for forced labour. The cordoning of the Riga ghetto began in August. On October 25<sup>th</sup> 1941 the gates surrounding *Maskavas forštate* in the east of the city of



Riga<sup>12</sup> were closed and approximately 30000 Jews were locked in this relatively small area.

In autumn 1941 the Nazis decided that the remaining Latvian Jews were to be killed. As coordinator for the mass killing, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler nominated Higher SS- and Police Leader Friedrich Jeckeln, who had also been in charge of the mass killing at Babi Yar near Kiev on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1941. Himmler saw the annihilation of the Jews as a priority. Members of the German Civilian administration in Latvia, however, argued that at least some of the Jews were still needed as forced labourers. Thus, a part of the ghetto – from then on called “small ghetto” – was created on November 27<sup>th</sup> 1941. Approximately 4000 men assumed to be capable of work stayed there, and 300 women needed as seamstresses were brought to the Central Prison. Those remaining in the main ghetto received written announcements on November 29<sup>th</sup> that they were going to be re-settled in a different area.

On November 30<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 a.m. Latvian SD men rounded up the ghetto and forced people out of their houses. Jews were organised in columns of 1000 people and made to walk to the forest of Rumbula. The situation was chaotic and many Jews tried to hide or resist. They were shot immediately. About 800 people were killed on their way to the killing site, and later buried in the former Jewish cemetery, which at the time was part of the ghetto. After a having been forced to walk eight kilometres to Rumbula, the Jewish men, women and children had to undress and hand over their valuables. They were dragged in the ditches, 30 to 40 meters long and 10 meters deep, and forced to lie down on their compatriots who had been killed moments ago. Then they were shot in the back of their heads. The killing lasted until dawn.<sup>13</sup>



*The Riga ghetto after the Rumbula „Aktion“.  
Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Best. 213-12  
Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht –  
Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen Nr. 0044  
Band 034.*

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<sup>12</sup> Area in the southeast of Riga, which used to be inhabited by mainly working-class people, among them Russians and Jews.

<sup>13</sup> It is not exactly known even today if Latvian higher ranking officers participated in the last meetings prior to the action. The Latvians did, however, participate with high manpower in the killing process. They were not elected as “Schießer” (Shooters), this task was only fulfilled by Germans, according to the interrogations in Hamburg, these men had been chosen by Jeckeln himself. The Latvians, however, were those who forced the Jews out of the ghetto and watched over the walk to the forest. From the 1700 men active in the action approximately 1000 were Latvians.

The Nazis organised a second massacre on December 8<sup>th</sup>, conducted in the same pattern. While

nobody survived the first massacre, three people are known to have managed to escape the second. Approximately 25000 Jews were killed in Rumbula on November 30<sup>th</sup> and December 8<sup>th</sup> 1941. Except of 1000 Jews from Berlin, who were shot in the



early morning hours of 30<sup>th</sup> November upon Jeckeln's orders all victims killed in

*On the way from the Riga ghetto to the Rumbula. Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Best. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen Nr. 0044 Band 034.*

Rumbula were Latvian Jews. Until 1944, the Nazis continued to use the place for further executions. At the end of the war they established special units who had to dig out and burn the corpses in the mass graves to hide the evidence of the crime.<sup>14</sup>

### **1945-1960: Early Commemoration and Stalinist Repressions**

As for other crimes in Latvia, Soviet investigations of Rumbula forest began right after the recapture of Riga in 1944. Members of the Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes excavated the mass graves, exhumed the corpses and questioned witnesses, as well as the few survivors. The Commission's files belong to the earliest and most comprehensive reports about the crimes committed by the National Socialists on Latvian territory. They are important sources, although the information they contain is to be used carefully, as it was mainly collected and used for propaganda. The numbers of victims given in the files were regularly too high. According to the report about Rumbula about 38000 people had been killed there. Today the numbers are estimated as having been around 25000.

After the Commission had finished its investigations, the forest was neglected; human remains could be discovered as they lay only barely covered by soil. Apart from individual survivors who came to Rumbula occasionally, the only people interested in the place seemed to have been Latvians searching the forest for property of the

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<sup>14</sup> Several hundred Jews from the "Kaiserwald" concentration camp, who were used for exhuming and burning bodies, were also killed here in 1944 when German troops were retreating and officials tried to hide all evidence of the crime.

murdered.<sup>15</sup> Rumbula was not a place of public interest for years to come. From the early 1950s it was used as a place for military exercise and firing practices.<sup>16</sup>

While no organised commemoration activity is recorded for the Rumbula forest in the early post-war years, remembrance of the National Socialist crimes was kept alive in other ways. For the Jewish community of Latvia, the loss had been dramatic: only about 500 Latvian Jews had survived the war in hiding with the help of local saviours and about 1200 survived the concentration camps, while approximately 70000 had been killed.

After the war, more than 10000 Latvian Jews, who had managed to escape to Soviet Russia before the German troops arrived, returned. Also many Jews originally from Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus started to settle in Latvia. The involvement in Jewish cultural activities varied among the different groups and it was mainly those who returned from the inner parts of the Soviet Union who became most active in revitalising Jewish life in Latvia.<sup>17</sup> Holocaust Commemoration was an integral part of this. Some of the activists planned to write an encyclopaedia about Jewish life in Latvia with a respective chapter about the ghetto. Furthermore, they wanted to create Holocaust memorials at Jewish cemeteries.

The attempts to re-create parts of Jewish life were interrupted by Stalinist repressions beginning in late 1948. Tensions between Israel and the USSR had been rising and negatively influenced the Soviet domestic Jewish politics. Thousands of Jews in the whole USSR were accused of anti-Soviet activities and imprisoned or deported. The anti-Jewish campaign also affected the Latvian Jews: the Soviet government closed two synagogues as well as the theatre and prohibited the Jewish choir in Riga. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs ("Народный комиссариат внутренних дел СССР", NKVD) arrested Jewish intellectuals, among them activists who had played an important role in the commemoration activities, detained them in prisons or deported them to hard labour camps in Siberia. Rumours spread among the Latvian Jews that deportations of the whole community were planned. In these years, signs of commemorating the Holocaust in Latvia as a crime against the Jews almost disappeared. With reference to Rumbula, the newspapers published a few reports, but concealed the Jewish background of the victims, and even hints of this kind vanished completely as the anti-Jewish campaigns became more obvious and harsh in the following years.

Thus, during Joseph Stalin's dictatorship Holocaust remembrance was a contradictory topic. For a short period of time after the Second World War Jewish suffering was presented and used in favour of ideological and economic interests of the

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<sup>15</sup> Bergman, Alexander (2009): *Aufzeichnungen eines Untermenschen. Ein Bericht über das Ghetto in Riga und die Konzentrationslager in Deutschland*, Bremen 2009, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout the 1950s one can find various articles in the newspapers about the military events and trainings at Rumbula.

<sup>17</sup> Survivors of the camps and ghettos were often neither in a physical condition to get involved in any activities for years. They had often lost all their family members and had to rebuild their lives from scratch. The Jews from Belarus, Ukraine or Russia who had only recently settled in Latvia did not feel a strong connection to Jewish traditions; many had much closer ties to Communism than it was usual for the Latvian Jews.

regime. Very soon, however, the regime began extensive anti-Jewish campaigns. Referring to the Holocaust became dangerous and Jews had to fear massive repressions.

### **1961-1967: Creation of the Rumbula Memorial**

Only in the late 1950s the last Jews arrested by the NKVD returned from prisons and labour camps. Many needed a long time to recover from the imprisonment after being released. Living for years under surveillance and the constant danger of being arrested had left a deep impact on people's lives and affected them for many years to come. Stalin's influence did not immediately disappear after his death.

The processes of de-Stalinisation thus only slowly provided more stability for the Jews in Latvia, but the terror ended and thereby the constant fear was reduced. Under Nikita Khrushchev, the regime distanced itself from the Stalin-Cult and within this change, it also implemented new memory politics. These considered not only heroes, but victims of the Second World War. In this context it also became possible to commemorate the Jewish losses more actively and openly. At the same time a young generation of Jews not traumatised by the experiences of the war was coming of age. At Rumbula the two generations of young and older activists met and shared positive experiences after more than a decade of repressions.

The initiative to create a place of commemoration in Rumbula started in 1961, when a group of Jews from Riga, who had been active in cultural life and had survived the war as refugees in the Soviet Union, began to scour the forest for the mass graves. Shmuel Bubi Ceitlin, one of the most active people at the site, later remembered that they had no difficulties to find the mass graves because they had stood out against the surroundings: big, red, previously unseen flowers were growing on the different soil.



*The first memorial plaque at Rumbula. Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Best. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen Nr. 0044 Band 034.*

These early activities were strongly connected to another location of the National Socialist mass crimes: in October 1962 the Riga City Council organised a ceremony at Biķernieki forest. While the victims in Rumbula had only been Jewish, in Biķernieki the Germans and Latvian collaborators killed Jews, POW, and Latvian partisans.<sup>18</sup> After the

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<sup>18</sup> This was the reason why the government accepted commemoration ceremonies there: The various ethnic and social backgrounds of these victims served the narrative of the victimised 'peaceful Soviet



official meeting at Biķernieki a group of Jewish people – including those who had started their activities there in 1961 – went to Rumbula, which is in the vicinity of Biķernieki. They put a wooden memorial plaque on one of the trees. It said in Yiddish: “Here, 38000 of Riga’s Jews died 30 XI 1941-8/9 XII 1941”. This preliminary memorial remained there until 1964.

From then on, ceremonies were held more regularly and gradually more people participated. They got to know about the meetings by the word of mouth or brief announcements at the synagogue. To enable as many people as possible to participate, the first Saturday in December was established as the major day of commemoration. Another regular commemoration day was the day of the liberation of the Stutthof concentration camp - the camp to which many Latvian Jews had been deported shortly before the end of the war - on May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Soon many young people came to Rumbula regularly on Sundays to work and to give it the dignity of a place of remembrance. The young Jewish people came mainly – but not only – from Riga. Some had lost relatives in Rumbula and wanted to commemorate them. For others, the forest was a place to meet other Jews. Many of these young men and women had been born after 1945. They were not traumatized directly by the war and the Holocaust, but had grown up in the Soviet society that discriminated Jews in various aspects of everyday life. In Rumbula they were among other Jews and could experience being Jewish as something positive. The cooperative work gave them a feeling of agency and unity.<sup>19</sup> In 1963, they inaugurated two other preliminary memorials created by the artist Josifs Kuzkovskis<sup>20</sup> called *Ebrejs (The Jew)* and *Pēdējā ceļā (On the Last Path)*.

Only in December 1964 the group had acquired enough financial means to build the first long-lasting monument. They received the money from private donations.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, no files, letters or other sources documenting the process of the memorial-building have been discovered, but the inscription “to the victims of fascism 1941-1944”, with the Hammer and Sickle added to it, is likely to have been the result of discussions with the Soviet authorities, as it does not mention the Jewish background of the victims. While the first memorial at least hints at their background by having a Yiddish inscription, the Soviet generalisation of victim groups prevailed in the second monument inaugurated at Rumbula in the same year. Here, the inscription reads: “In the

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*citizens’* without emphasising that the majority of the people had been killed for being Jewish. The ceremony was officially dedicated to the “Nazi victims”.

<sup>19</sup> This spirit was strongly connected to the Zionist movement in the country and many of the activists at Rumbula Zionists themselves. They sang Zionist songs while working in the forest and talked about the idea of migration. For them, the activities in Rumbula were a symbol of a new-born Jewish spirit. Some Jews in Latvia sharply criticised the use of a site of mass murder for political purposes. The dominance of Zionists and the ongoing discussions about their influence are reflected in a preliminary memorial that was created in Rumbula in 1963, but disappeared soon after. It is not clear who disassembled it. It was a huge Star of David and was criticized as being an advertisement for Zionism. Some Jews were also worried because the big star was visible from the railway close to the forest. Every traveller on the trains to Riga would inevitably see it and this was likely to cause troubles with the Soviet authorities.

<sup>20</sup> Kuzkovskis moved to Riga after the war, where he started to deal with the Holocaust in his artworks.

<sup>21</sup> Donators were among others Jewish members of the Communist Party of Latvia and those in higher positions – e.g. directors of factories.

years 1941 – 1945 here in Rumbula’s forest 50 000 Soviet citizens, political prisoners, prisoners of war, and other victims of Fascism were brutally executed and shot.”<sup>22</sup>

Every year since 1962, the Riga City Council organised ceremonies at Rumbula in line with the Soviet ideology and under control of the KGB. At these official ceremonies, an orchestra played military music and party members held speeches focusing on the various groups of people who had been killed here because they had been fighting against Fascism. Nobody talked explicitly about the Jewish victims. After these ceremonies, the Jewish activists stayed to sing Yiddish songs and a Caddish in memory of the murdered Jews. At these private meetings survivors talked about their experiences and sometimes Jews from other countries attended.



*The first monument nowadays.*

Some Jewish activists later interpreted the measures taken by the authorities in Rumbula as a symbol of the general anti-Jewish policy of the Soviet regime. However, the fact that their private gatherings were not rigorously prohibited shows that it was not the main goal for the Soviet regime to suppress the commemoration of the Holocaust. To a greater degree, the authorities tried to control and restrict these activities as symbols of Zionism and the promotion of Jewish emigration.

In the 1960s, Rumbula became one of the most important ‘sites of memory’ in the USSR. The Jewish tragedy was perpetuated in the physical cultural environment. It was

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<sup>22</sup> “1941. – 1944. gados šeit Rumbulas mežā tika zvēriski nobendēti un nošauti 50 tūkstoši padomju pilsoņu, politisko ieslodzīto, kara gūstekņu un citu Fašisma upuri”. The sources did not reveal who ordered the building of the second memorial. The inscription, however, allows assuming that the Soviet government created this second memorial to use it for propaganda purposes. Holocaust survivor Alexander Bergman remembered that the official inauguration of the second memorial was “swamped with Komsomolzi” who were from then on “ordered to Rumbula [...] every year afterwards”. Bergmann 2009:48-49.

communicated not only at the commemoration events themselves, but also in the media and literary works. Among others, the newspaper “Rīgas Balss” published the article “People, watch out! Tragedy in Rumbula”<sup>23</sup>. Holocaust survivor Mendel Bash created his Oratorio “In Memory of Victims of Fascism”, which unofficially is also known as Oratorio “Rumbula”. Furthermore, celebrated Latvian writers like Ojārs Vācietis, Viktors Līvzemnieks and Skaidrīte Kaldupe wrote poems commemorating the Rumbula massacre.

### **Rumbula by Ojārs Vācietis**

*I walk past the forest's eyes –  
its lashes brush my shoulder.  
Under my feet, a mound of earth sighs.  
These are the only sounds,  
and I stop  
to stop all sound.  
No longer can I hold the dam  
that my sight broke down:  
the wood is filled with screams  
and shudders cleave to the pines,  
to the craggy bark that remembers.  
The dirt that covers those interred alive  
quivers until dawn.*

*And my throbbing pulse knocks this forest down  
in the name of birches and children  
in the name of lips that will not cry out  
in the name of words that refuse to die.*

*And I curse the forest: The likes of you –  
we do not need you now!*

*Like a seething crater, the forest assails me.  
Its green and angry voice, like a spiking current,  
rushes through me:*

*Thou shalt not strut before my eyes  
nor flirt before my lashes  
nor find solace in my mounds.*

*I stand and scream in Rumbula, this green crater  
in the midst of grainfields, where every soul  
that has entered me speaks with my tongue.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Radionovs, I. (1959, 30. nov.). Cilvēki esiet modri! Rumbulas traģēdija. *Rīgas Balss*. 3. lpp.

<sup>24</sup> Translated by Charles Fishman and Inta Ezergailis. See: Ezergailis, I. (1999). When Baltic Eyes... A Look at Some Baltic Holocaust Poems. *World Literature Today*, 73 (3), 429–444.

## **1967-1989: Rumbula after the Six Day War**

Similarly to the post-war period which had been favourable for remembrance activities, the time of the 'thaw' in the 1960s facilitated the commemoration of the Holocaust. This period was interrupted by the international developments and rapid change in the Soviet policy, which resulted in anti-Jewish campaigns at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s.

In June 1967, the Six Day War caused confrontation between the Soviet Union and Israel. Due to this the Soviet regime activated harsh propaganda against Jews within the Soviet Union. While state repressions had strongly reduced Jewish activities in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this time they worked like a trigger: Jews started to speak out against the injustice and expressed their Jewishness more openly instead of turning silent. Also those who had not been religious or attached to Judaism before remembered that the war made them identify as Jews much more. This was also reflected in the increasing number of people who met at Rumbula every weekend to clean the forest and build the memorial park.

This development did not go unnoticed by the authorities: visible and invisible spies observed the regular ceremonies. Confrontations occurred regularly. When the Jews in Riga wanted to conduct their mourning ceremonies in the years 1971, 1972 and 1973, the forest was full of militiamen pretending to do military training; the Jews reacted by holding a substitute ceremony at the Rumbula airport.<sup>25</sup> Whether as a reaction of growing international interest or because of local decisions, the Riga district authorities granted stones to the activists to encircle the ditches of the massacre and delivered them in March 1974.

After the Six Day War, thousands of Soviet Jews applied for migration to Israel and the number of Jews from Latvia was particularly high.<sup>26</sup> This affected the activities at Rumbula, since these had been dominated by Zionists. Many of the main activists left Latvia before the end of 1974. Although the community was heavily affected by the exodus of so many of its most active members, Jewish cultural life in Latvia did not disappear. A young generation of activists emerged, teaching each other Jewish traditions and language. This was ever more important in the early 1980s, when emigration policy became more restrictive again and it was nearly impossible to emigrate. Many Jews tried to preserve their Jewish identity within Latvia.

Although there are only very few sources, it is known that some Jews also continued to conduct commemoration ceremonies in Rumbula after the emigration of the major Zionists. Those who participated had to deal with limitations of the ceremonies and permanent presence of the militia. The ceremonies continued in the 1980s, but the number of participants declined and there is no information about people

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<sup>25</sup>The militia then arrested six of the participants and accused them of hooliganism in a public place. The international press reacted, especially the Jewish Telegraph Agency in London. It reported regularly when Jews at Rumbula were harassed. <http://www.jta.org/1972/04/14/archive/four-jews-who-participated-in-memorial-services-arrested>; 2014/06/13; 12:37

<sup>26</sup> 35% of the Jews who migrated from the USSR to Israel (and later other countries) in the years 1968 to 1980 were from Latvia.

working at the place on weekends. While the Jewish movement in Latvia had been mainly in the hands of the Zionists in the 1960s, the participation was now spread among a more heterogeneous group. Many did not focus only on the goals of Zionism. They wanted to establish a rich cultural Jewish life in Latvia, and commemoration activity in Rumbula was to be part of this.

### **1990-the present: from silenced memory to remembrance**

Implementing the Holocaust in the social memory after Latvia regained its independence was a complicated task.<sup>27</sup> Although the state has officially condemned anti-Semitism and crimes against Jews during the Second World War, the official decision-making processes and public statements by politicians have indicated a conflicting attitude towards the Jewish tragedy. On the level of the official memory the Nazi crimes have for a long period of time remained in the shadow of the repressions implemented by the Soviet regime. Processes of social memory of the Holocaust after restoration of independence of Latvia can be divided in three periods.

#### **1990-1997: active silence**

*Formal condemnation of the Holocaust on the state level, which occasionally was overshadowed by anti-Semitic statements in discussions about perpetuation and promotion of the Holocaust memory and the memory policy developers' emphasis put on the Soviet crimes.*

The 1990s were characterised by the efforts of Latvia to strengthen the Holocaust memory on a formal level, as well as passionate informal discussions and activation of the anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda myths. These link Jews with the Soviet crimes, most explicitly with the Soviet repressions and deportations to Siberia in 1941, the central element in the discourse on Latvian suffering. One of the vivid examples of the Nazi propaganda myth used by a politician occurred in commemorative event in Rumbula, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1991 when Anatolijs Gorbunovs, Chairman of the Republic of Latvia Supreme Council, stated that "the Jewish nation, too, can look back self-critically on the role of their predecessors in history, especially the revolution in 1918 and the events which took place in Latvia in 1940."<sup>28</sup>

#### **1998-2004: institutionalising the Holocaust memory**

*Institutionalisation of the Holocaust memory, which was implemented as inclusion of the Holocaust in school programs, organisation of educational seminars and establishment of research infrastructure.*

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<sup>27</sup> The Nazi and Soviet propaganda heritage on the one hand is an exaggeration of the Latvian role, which is especially manifested in the thesis on the so called no-government period that lasted a month or more during which the local people started killing Jews on their own, on the other hand it is a denial to accept any Latvian self-initiative aspect in carrying out of the Holocaust, reducing any efforts to talk about this matter to the impact of the Nazi and Soviet propaganda.

<sup>28</sup> "Arī ebreju tauta var paškritiski atskatīties uz iepriekšējo paaudžu personību lomu vēsturē, it īpaši 1918. gada revolūcijā un 1940. gada notikumos Latvijā". [http://jaunagaita.net/jg187/JG187\\_MEZGLI.htm](http://jaunagaita.net/jg187/JG187_MEZGLI.htm)

The Holocaust memory and remembrance was institutionalised along with Latvia expressing its will to enter the Euro-Atlantic organisations – the EU and NATO. The international requirements prescribed an in-depth research of the Holocaust, its inclusion in school programs, participation of Latvia in promotion of the Holocaust remembrance, as well as other institutional measures. As a result, since the turn of centuries, the Holocaust has become officially recognised and has been formally condemned. Latvian historians have dedicated significant efforts to research and document the destruction of Jews in Latvia, including regions and towns. The Holocaust has become an important part of school programs, and with the government support, various educating programs are implemented. Associations, museums and organisations take care of the Holocaust remembrance. At the time various important commemorative programs were launched and new monuments established.

On Rumbula mass execution site a memorial designed by Sergejs Rizhs was inaugurated on November 29<sup>th</sup> 2002. It was created with the support of various state and private institutions and organizations, as well as donations by individuals from Latvia, Israel, USA, and Germany. Near the road, at the entrance to the memorial complex, on the path on which 25000 were driven to their deaths, a metal construction represents the horror of the catastrophe. Due to this, the memorial complex on the killing site itself was constructed: “The base of the candlestick has the shape of the Star of David, whose sides bear engravings of the ghetto street names. The names of those killed in Rumbula are carved into the granite stones. On the grounds of the memorial there are six mass graves marked by rectangular raised concrete borders.”<sup>29</sup> While creating the new memorial, the first memorial stone from the Soviet period was preserved.

### **2005-the present: towards remembering Rumbula**

*Social and political implementation of the Holocaust memory, discussions about the necessity to be aware and understand the tragedy, which took place among intellectuals.*

Consequently, these activities led to a greater acknowledgment of the Holocaust tragedy among a wider public. Finally, 2015 was the first time, when the highest-ranking state officials took part in commemorative events in Rumbula since Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga inaugurated the monument in 2002. The president of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis stated: “We are acutely aware of this here at Rumbula, the site of a monstrous crime. We are in a place where people were betrayed and slaughtered. This was an act instigated by occupying powers. Our state had been destroyed. Regrettably, there were those amongst us who turned to evil. What they did is deplorable and must be condemned.”<sup>30</sup> 2016 witnessed a new commemorative activity – several hundreds of Latvians placed candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga on the night of 30<sup>th</sup> November. The event was organised in memory of the Latvian Jews killed in Rumbula 75 years ago.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://213.21.223.130/en/content/memorial-rumbula>

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.lsm.lv/en/article/societ/society/hundreds-remember-the-rumbula-thousands.a212585/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_campaign=news&utm\\_medium=like\\_button](http://www.lsm.lv/en/article/societ/society/hundreds-remember-the-rumbula-thousands.a212585/?utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=news&utm_medium=like_button)



Even if the tragic events are well known in the society today, the forest is still sometimes connected to a different topic: Since Latvia has regained independence, the designation 'the notorious Rumbula' has been used in the media not to refer to the massive destruction of Jews, but to characterise low quality products and services in the car market in Rumbula.



*Remembrance ceremony at the Rumbula memorial, November 29, 2016. Didzis Bērziņš.*

Except for such references, however, the murder site in Rumbula is becoming a symbol of the Holocaust in Latvia. Regardless of the criticism expressed for these practices, currently it is the most successful way to strengthen memories and make abstract events comprehensible and understandable to the contemporary people. Representation of an abstract event and formation of memory using real, physical objects and memorial places is a common practice, and Rumbula is not an exception to an episode becoming a symbolic manifestation of a larger event. Other examples are Auschwitz, the Warsaw ghetto, Babi Yar and many more. Similarly to Auschwitz which for many people symbolizes the Holocaust in Europe, Rumbula is also becoming a synecdoche – a general denotation of the Holocaust in Latvia.

## *Establishment and Evolution of the Klooga Holocaust Memorial*

### **The Holocaust Remembrance in Estonia**

In the Soviet era the remembrance of the Holocaust did not belong to the public discourse. At the same time the remembrance of the victims of war, in order to glorify the Great Patriotic war and its victory over “fascism”, was promoted. The mass murder sites of detained Jews also were exploited for this purpose. From the very beginning it was not mentioned that the victims were Jews, and they were designated as anonymous “Soviet citizens”, but in fact, quite many of them had never been citizens of the Soviet Union. In this way all memorial stones and memorial plaques had to be marked. However, this could not work in cases where the initiative was private. When the Jewish community asked permission to erect the monument with plaque wording “To the victims of fascism” in the Jewish cemetery, Tallinn-Rahumäe, in 1968, their request was rejected. The argument, that it would be the first memorial to commemorate Estonian Jews perished during the Holocaust didn’t help either. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to receive a permission, the representatives of the Jewish community had learnt that Soviet authorities would not intervene, if the monument had been erected without approval. So it happened that in 1973, on a single night, the monument was erected secretly, with wording “In memory of victims of fascism” in Estonian and Russian, as well as “We will never forget you” in Yiddish and Hebrew. Though the project had been accomplished against the will of the Soviet authorities, no sanctions followed.

The first open meeting commemorating the Holocaust under the Soviet regime, however, was held in Estonia only in 1989. From then on restrictions on remembering the Holocaust vanished. Since 2002, 27 January is the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust. The main commemoration ceremony is arranged and coordinated by certain state agencies in the cooperation with the local Jewish community. On the same day events are held either at Klooga, at the synagogue, or at the Jewish cemetery in Tallinn, Rahumäe. The date of the massacre at the Klooga camp on September 19, 1944 is annually commemorated upon the initiative of the Jewish community.

A series of memorial stones and memorials connected with the Holocaust existed from the Soviet period. After the restoration of independence they all were given their true meaning, replacing their plaques with new ones. In addition, during the last decade, plaques and memorial stones have been installed in various other places.

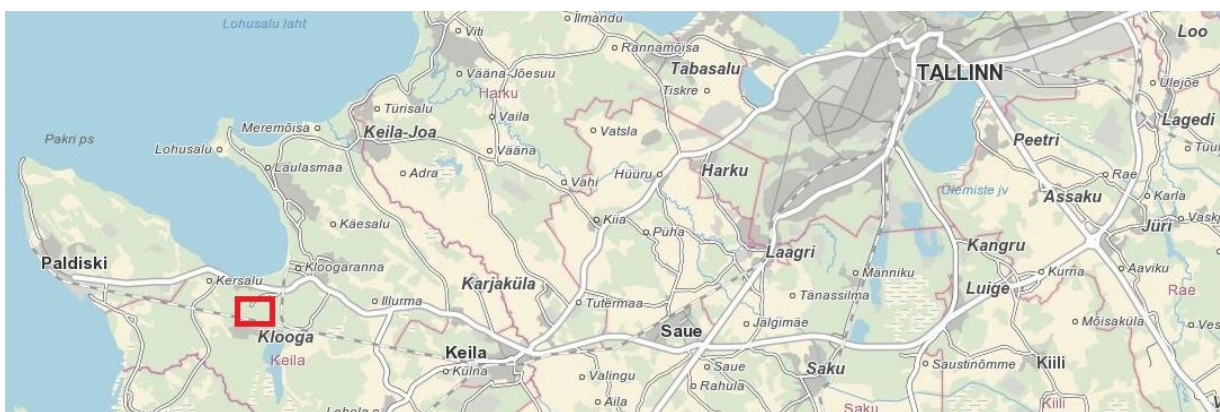
In the current National Curriculum (adopted in 2011) the contemporary history course consists of thematic blocks, the Holocaust belonging to the topics of World War II and totalitarian regimes in the thematic block of recent history. The main research in the matters related to the Holocaust on the territory of Estonia was accomplished during



1999–2006 under the aegis of the International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, and published in a compendium “Estonia 1940–1945. Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity” in 2006. After this major effort, research in this field has not been centrally coordinated and in recent years has been somewhat limited.

### **Klooga Holocaust Memorial**

The Klooga concentration camp, located 40 km to the west of Tallinn, was one of the first sites in Europe where the Holocaust and its victims were documented. The Klooga camp was a branch of the Vaivara concentration camp. It consisted of more than twenty camps; the Klooga was one of the largest in Vaivara network and operated for the longest period, from September 1943 to 19 September 1944.



*Site plan of the Klooga Memorial*

The camp was established in September 1943 in the immediate vicinity of the village of Klooga. The area had already been turned into a closed military base during the preceding Soviet occupation (1940-1941).

The Klooga massacre was committed on 19 September 1944 by the German administration of the concentration camp. On the very same day, on 19 September, the camp administration, unwilling to evacuate the captives to Germany, decided to liquidate the Klooga camp.

The majority of the nearly 2 000 Jews were killed on the prepared pyres, a kilometre away from the camp in a clearing of the forest, the pyres had been built to burn the bodies. After the mass shooting on 19 September the pyres were lit. Most of the victims had been forcibly relocated from the Vilna and Kovno ghettos in the second half of 1943 and transferred to Klooga only in the summer of 1944, the latest.

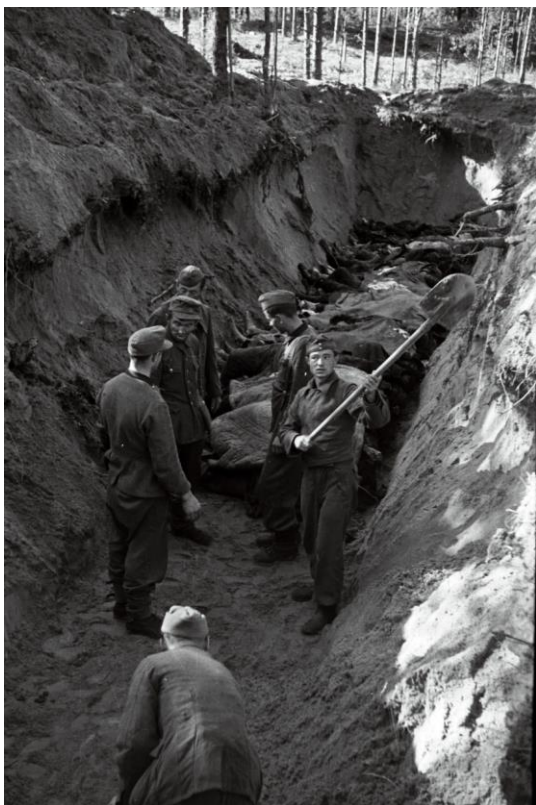
A couple of days later the Red Army, having reached Klooga, discovered the corpses – some charred, some half-burnt, and some had remained intact. Through the eyes of the British and U.S. journalists, called to the site by the Soviet authorities, the atrocities that had occurred in Klooga were reported to the whole world.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Most frequently quoted reportage with photographs appeared in the weekly news magazine *Life* by John Hersey. See: John Kersey. Prisoner, 339, Klooga. *Life* 30 October 1944, pp. 73–83.



*Pyres with burned bodies. Members of the extraordinary commission formed to investigate the mass murder in Klooga seen in the background are. September 1944. Estonian Film Archives.*



*German prisoners of war finish the digging of graves for the victims of the mass murder. September-October 1944. Estonian Film Archives*

The Soviet media also described in detail that what occurred in Klooga in late 1944 and early 1945, and time and again in the subsequent years.

From the very beginning, for ideological reasons, it was not mentioned that the camp captives had been Jews. The victims were said to have been anonymous ‘Soviet citizens’, or their nationality was deliberately misrepresented, alleging that there were Russians and Estonians, as well as Lithuanians, Poles and Latvians among the victims.

The first memorial service in Klooga, a funeral ceremony for the victims of the mass murder, was held on 7 October 1944. The German POWs were forced to dig two long deep graves in the sandy hill near the murder site where the remains were buried. The gravesite was surrounded by a stone fence. In



1951 a memorial stone was erected in the graveyard with the epitaph “To the Everlasting Memory of the Victims of Fascism”.

Later plaques condemning the perpetrators of the massacre were fitted on the monument, they were called ‘fascist murderers’, and ‘enemies of the Soviet people’, while the victims were referred to as ‘Soviet citizens’. Still later plaques with information in Estonian and Russian were added, describing the Klooga concentration camp and the tragedy of 19 September, in the style of Soviet puritanism.



*Soviet postcard with the first monument of the Klooga Memorial in 1965*

The Klooga monument was one of the first in the Soviet Estonia commemorating the victims of fascism. Official memorial ceremonies were regularly held at the site. It is also known that during the 1960s and 1970s on 19 September foot orienteering competition to commemorate victims of the Klooga massacre was held. The survivors and relatives of those who had perished in the Klooga camp were neither invited, nor welcome to participate in those ceremonies and events. Furthermore they lived mostly abroad and probably could not have visited the memorial anyway, because Klooga was included in the Soviet border zone, and foreign citizens could not receive permission to visit it.

Circumstances changed at the end of the 1980s. A group of former Klooga prisoners from Israel visited the memorial site for first time in May 1989. Since the monument erected in 1951 carried a message of Communist ideology rather than commemorated the Holocaust victims, discussions of the need to replace the memorial

stone in Klooga began. In 1994, shortly after the restoration of Estonia's independence, however, the plaques on the monument were replaced at the request of the Jewish community in Estonia to restore the truth about the nationality of the victims. At the same time the Soviet red star on the top of the monument was removed and only in 2013 it was replaced by the Star of David.

During the independence period Klooga memorial has been considerably expanded. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Klooga massacre, a monument to all Jews murdered in Estonia in 1941-1944 was erected about a hundred meters from the existing monument. This was the first monument in Estonia commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. A third monument was erected in Klooga in 2005 to commemorate all Jews who had been killed or died in labour and concentration camps in Estonia between 1941 and 1944. The memorial is located approximately 200 meters to the south of the prior monument to the victims of the Holocaust.



*Site plan of the Klooga memorial monuments: 1) Monument to all Jews murdered in Estonia in 1941-1944. 1994. 2) Memorial stone on the gravesite of the victims of Klooga massacre. 1951. 3) Monument to all Jews who were killed or died in labour and concentration camps in Estonia between 1941 and 1944. 2005.*



*The second (on the left) and third (on the right) monument of the Klooga Memorial. Olev Liivik*





The Klooga memorial underwent extensive restoration in 2013, before the Estonian History Museum outdoor exhibition "Klooga camp and the Holocaust" was opened to visitors. The outdoor exhibition was prepared in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture and the Jewish Community of Estonia. The exhibition provides an overview of the Holocaust in Estonia and elsewhere in Europe as well as of the Klooga concentration camp, the massacre of 19 September 1944 and the commemoration of the victims. The huge concrete blocks with the exhibition texts symbolise the Klooga concentration camp – the prisoners manufactured, among other things, concrete elements for the German military industry. A number of concrete blocks, which merge with the landscape, form a unity with the individual monuments erected at different times, creating a modern, architecturally diverse and visitor-friendly environment.



*View of the concrete blocks with the exhibition "Klooga Camp and the Holocaust".  
Estonian History Museum*

The Klooga memorial is the main site where memorial events to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in Estonia are held. Each year, on or around 19 September, the Estonian Jewish community holds a memorial ceremony on the site. The ceremony is often attended by representatives of the Government. As of the early 2000s, International Holocaust Remembrance Day is marked in Klooga with the participation of the members of the Government. The outdoor exhibition has been visited by schoolchildren, tourists and local residents.



*Opening ceremony of the exhibition “Klooga Camp and the Holocaust” on 3 September 2013. Estonian History Museum*

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