



# LOVE AND SORROW, REINFORCED BY TEARS

After travelling thousands of kilometres, the conqueror soldier, wounded but surviving, returns to his own family, which he defended, without regard for his own life, in battles against the enemy. But he finds that there is no-one to meet him at the threshold of his home. He finds out from his neighbours that the enemy killed his family and loved ones... A story from ancient times, repeated frequently in world literature - and unfortunately recognisable to this day.

After returning to his hometown of Veisiejai in Dzūkija after the war, 28 year-old Josifas Levinsonas learned that his father and friends had been shot during the first months of the Nazi occupation. He questioned the neighbours and local inhabitants, watched their faces closely, listened to their stories. From them he learned that the killers were not only German Nazis, but also fellow countrymen with whom he, his parents, and many generations of relatives had lived peacefully, sometimes had known each other well, even been friends.

What was he to do? how to continue living, when life had been transformed so irreversibly?

His head was splitting. Perhaps it was a dangerous head wound that he'd suffered at the front when fighting in the 16th Lithuanian Division... Perhaps it hurt out of sorrow for the killed Veisiejai Jews... Even today Levinsonas gets upset when talking about what he found out in 1945: "They were all killed. I went to where they'd herded the Jews together. They gathered them from the surrounding villages and killed them. When I heard how it had happened, the hair on my head stood on end," - he recounts to a correspondent from the London Jewish Chronicle. Levinsonas remembers that after the war the Soviet authorities carefully hid the fact that it was Jews who had been killed. He was angered by the deceitful inscriptions



Sculpture at the Kaušėnai memorial near Plungė.

**Long-term assistant to the chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, as well as a long-term employee at the State Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum, now a pensioner, 93 year-old member of the Lithuanian Jewish Community Josifas Levinsonas, was honoured on September 1 at the Central London synagogue.**

**Levinsonas visited Great Britain at the invitation of Barry Marcus, head of the Central London synagogue, at the end of August - beginning of September. The sincere gratitude of all British Jews who survived the Holocaust for Levinsonas' great contribution in immortalising the memory of Lithuanian Jews who were killed by the Nazis and their local collaborators was expressed at a reception organised in his honour. He was presented with awards for his work in restoring, marking, and preserving circa 200 sites where approximately 200,000 Jews were shot dead during the Second World War.**



Josifas Levinsonas at a killing site near Anykščiai.

on memorial signs above 20-50 metre long hills of graves scattered throughout Lithuania. The inscriptions read: "Buried here are 3,000 innocent Soviet citizens, killed by German fascist butchers on October 20, 1941"; "Killed here in 1941 were 250 Soviet people". In some places there weren't even any statistics: "To those who died at the hands of the German occupier". The nationality of those who were killed was concealed. In the best case scenario it was confirmed that they had been "peaceful Soviet citizens", and their killers "German fascist invaders" or "occupiers". This was the deceitful Soviet policy of "the indissoluble friendship of Soviet nations". It was this "friendship" that allowed no-one to mention that the victims were Jews, and that their direct killers were local Nazi collaborators.

In January 1949, the minister of Lithuanian SSR defence announced to first secretary of the central committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Antanas Sniečkus, that the Paneriai memorial had been "designed in a religious style" and "does not reflect anything Soviet". A more important detail was the fact that the Jews had voluntarily erected the monument with their own funds, that the inscription was not about Soviet people, but about 70,000 Jews, and that it was hewn into the granite in Jewish (!!!) letters. The monument was torn down in 1952. A standard stele with the words "Buried here are Soviet people exterminated by German fascist invaders" appeared on a small hill, not far from where the original had stood.

In the Soviet time no-one dared ask: "Where did over 200,000 people disappear to?" In no other European, Nazi-occupied country had the local inhabitants been so active in aiding the occupiers in "the final solution to the Jewish question", as in Lithuania.

Was is then, or sometime later, that Levinsonas decided that he had to do everything in his power to preserve the memory of the victims of the Holocaust? - who knows? The significant fact was that the implementation of the idea - to drive out the lie consolidated in the inscriptions on memorial signs, from the

story of the annihilation of the Jews of Lithuania - became possible only 45 years after the war. "I lived in the Soviet Union, where the official line was that everyone who had been killed in Lithuania was a Soviet person. That's how important it was to them that there be no Jews," - said Levinsonas.

In 1989, soon after the Lithuanian Jewish Cultural Association (LŽKD) and the State Jewish Mu-



Central part of the memorial to genocide victims, the Vidzgiris forest near Alytus.

seum were set up in Lithuania, J. Levinsonas joined the organisation, and in his own characteristic way declared that he wanted to put in order the sites of the mass killing of the Jews. His offer was accepted.

But first he had to prepare the legal field - to substantiate the need to appropriately mark the sites of the mass killing of Lithuania's Jews, and to present the official bodies with all the necessary documents. He had to involve the local municipal bodies in this work, for without them it would be impossible to find the sites, or to get material support.

Levinsonas was elected chairman of the commission of the Lithuanian Jewish Cultural Association (later the Lithuanian Jewish Community). The commission was in charge of taking care of the sites of the mass killing of the Jews, and of the old Jewish cemeteries. At Levinsonas' suggestion, the heads of the Jewish Community accepted, and presented to the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania, a proposal for the maintenance of the sites of the mass killing of the Jews, and of the old cemeteries. A decree was passed by the Republic of Lithuania on November 7, 1990, and the municipalities were issued with instructions to

provide assistance in this work. Then came the time to resolve concrete issues regarding each burial site in conjunction with the local authorities.

In a period of four years, Levinsonas drove around literally all of Lithuania: during their six centuries of life, the Jews in Lithuania did not live in settlements or ghettos, but throughout the entire country. Having received a charter in 1388 from Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas the Great to live and work for the good of Lithuania, as well as for the good of their own nation and families, the Jews settled in large and small Lithuanian cities, towns, and villages.

During the war years, the Jews were killed everywhere, and there are Holocaust burial sites in practically every settlement - a total of about 200 throughout the Lithuanian territory.

Levinsonas' son Aleksandras said that for four years his father would leave home early Monday morning, and come home late Friday night. The following Monday he would again drive off "to work", and again return before the Saturday. He would probably not have returned on the Saturday or the Sunday either, but municipalities took those days off, and there would not have been anyone to make decisions with.

He had to find and examine all of the burial sites, put them in order, identify the plots, and together with municipal workers develop a plan of action - how to organise the burial sites into an appropriate form, how to knock down the old, and erect new monuments and memorial signs with new inscriptions. Levinsonas managed to rally a group community members as helpers. One such helper was Jevsejus Jacovskis, who prepared stencils for inscriptions on the memorials in Lithuanian and Yiddish. At the same time, Levinsonas had to find archival documents to recreate a real picture of how the Jews were hunted and apprehended, who captured those who were in hiding and those who had hidden them, and how and how many people were killed on what date, in one place or another.

The Jewish Chronicle correspondent asked what sort of impression those documents had made on Levinsonas. The latter, a quiet person of few words, responded briefly: "There were some terrible stories. I cried when I was reading them."

Levinsonas photographed the old gravestones and then the new ones that were erected in their place, and later came up with the idea to create a catalogue, a strange sort of guide through places of sadness and pain. While compiling it, he realised that he was creating something more than just a catalogue - he was creating a book in memory of an exterminated people. He continued writing for nearly four more years. "The Book of Sorrow", published in 1997, is a unique publication - a guide through the sites where Jews were killed during the Second World War - and is meant for a broad range of readers: the text is written in Yiddish, Hebrew, Lithuanian, and English.

Together with Jacovskis, Levinsonas created an unique map of Lithuania - covered in symbols indicating the sites of the mass killings. It is a map of the geography of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Today it hangs in the Holocaust in Lithuania exhibition.

In an article entitled "Will the Užupis cemetery really disappear?", published some time ago in the "Lietuvos Rytas" ("Sostinė") newspaper, J. Levinsonas wrote the following: "Gravestone monuments are Love and Sorrow - reinforced by tears, united by tears. Man perpetuates man by carrying his memory in his heart, and by continuing his work. They are sacred symbols uniting life on earth with the eternal universe."

Levinsonas is 93 years old. Other people have now been appointed by the Jewish Community to take care of the killing sites and Jewish cemeteries. The work of preserving historical memory, which he started over twenty years ago, is being perpetuated.

The Jewish Community of Lithuania, and its board and executive, congratulate Josifas Levinsonas on the occasion of his merited award, and wish him strong health and a long life.

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