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Latvian Center

HOLOCAUST EVENT

Feb 4, 2023

Leadership of the local Latvian Society, government officials, fellow consuls, fellow Balts and guests.

At the outset, I acknowledge my painting on the podium, painted by Latvian Holocaust survivor and longtime Los Angeles artist, Kalman Aron.

I am pleased to see so many of you here today to discuss some aspects of Evil that took place in the Baltics during World War II. As a Latvian, I grew up knowing about the mass deportations of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians to Siberia by the Soviet Union. Yet little was mentioned about the Holocaust in Baltic circles in this country. The Holocaust needs no explanation. It is one of the greatest crimes in history. To attempt to prevent recurrence, we must face the authentic facts and learn the lessons it teaches. The Soviet deportations sent thousands of victims from the Baltics, occupied Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova to Siberia and many to their deaths – 60,000 Latvians were thus deported and many died in the Gulag. Most Balts my age have a personal connection to this tragedy and have a relative or friend who was deported to Siberia. These events have left an indelible scar on the psyche of Balts. Yet even more Latvian citizens of Jewish ancestry were murdered in Latvia, and little is mentioned about that tragedy in Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian circles in America

Prior to WWII, there were 4,500 Jewish Estonian citizens, 94,000 Latvian Jewish citizens and 210,000 Lithuanian Jewish citizens. Latvia also had 4,000 Roma prior to the War.

95% of these innocents, along with train loads of Jews shipped in cattle cars from Germany, Austria and other countries, along with thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, were also murdered on Baltic soil. I read a statistic that in Lithuania, Germans assigned to these murders numbered only 139 personnel, of whom 44 were secretaries and drivers. In all, there were fewer than 1000 Nazi soldiers on Lithuanian soil after the conquest of the Baltics. I did not find a similar comparison for Estonia or Latvia, but I suspect those numbers would be similar. Historians attribute the efficiency of these murderers to the massive collaboration in the genocide by local Balts who eagerly participated in the rounding up and murdering of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. In Latvia, these murders were assisted by Perkonkrusts and Viktors Arajs Commandos. These murderers were condemned by the Latvian government after independence was restored.

Some 20 years ago, my late father wrote a memoir about his life and escape from Latvia and that book ignited my desire to learn even more about Latvian history during the 20th century. My passion for history has resulted in my reading over a hundred books about the Baltics, the Bloodlands as Yale Professor Timothy Snyder calls Eastern Europe, the Gulag and Soviet occupation, and naturally, about the Holocaust. It puzzled me that the Holocaust was not discussed at Baltic events in this country. Last year I approached the head of the Latvian Community here in Los Angeles, the late Ivars Miculs, and my Ambassador in Washington, about my idea to screen a Baltic Holocaust film to the Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian communities to generate discussion about the Holocaust in the Baltic community. I received my Ambassador’s and the Latvian Society Board of directors’ unanimous support for this rather unique proposal.

I knew of a film called Baltic Truth, which dealt with the Holocaust in Latvia and Lithuania, and got permission from the Director to screen the film but received immense pressure from the Lithuanian government not to show this film, which they labeled as Russian propaganda. To bend to sensitivities of others, my Government requested we not address anything outside of the Latvian borders. This is why we are focusing on today’s documentary: “It Is Only Now We Begin”. This documentary will be our starting point to discuss the horrific events that occurred in Latvia during the Holocaust. It is the story of Marģers Vestermanis, a Latvian historian, one of the few Holocaust survivors in Latvia. This documentary explores living life after surviving ghettos and concentration camps, and finding that your family has been murdered. I was happy to receive the support of the Estonian community for this event and am grateful to them for publishing the invite in their newsletter, but the Lithuanians refused to participate.

During the Soviet occupation of the Baltics, all talk about the Holocaust was suppressed, mass murder sites were ignored. Upon regaining Independence, the Latvian government looked deeply into the atrocities that occurred on our soil during the War years. Even prior to restoring Latvia's independence, the Supreme Council of Latvia adopted a declaration on the condemnation and prohibition of Genocide and Anti-Semitism in Latvia, which was the starting point for Latvia's significant work in Holocaust research, remembrance, education and the fight against modern forms of anti-Semitism. After independence was regained, the new government instituted a program in which property confiscated by the Nazis and Soviets during the War could be reclaimed by previous owners. Synagogues were returned to Jewish communities.

But the government was rightfully criticized since much of the property previously owned by Jews could not be returned as there were few surviving heirs. That situation was rectified last year by establishing a fund for use by the entire Latvian Jewish community for years to come in restitution for financial losses sustained during the war.

It is to the eternal shame of Latvia and Latvians that any Latvian participated in murdering and persecuting their co-citizens. The Holocaust and the Soviet deportations to Siberia happened in Latvia with the willing participation of numerous Latvian citizens. The actions of collaborators with the Bolshevik and Nazi occupiers will stand as our eternal shame. Latvians who murdered other Latvians were monsters. They were traitors to our nation and must be condemned for eternity. No Latvian who murdered another Latvian can ever be a hero of our nation, for they destroyed Latvia from within. Yes, there are gaps in Latvian memory. Latvia is by no means perfect! As we learn of gaps, we will sincerely do our best to address them. I offer my personal commitment that I will work towards full transparency and truth. The victims deserve nothing less. A society can only heal from within when truth is told and accountability exists. I unreservedly condemn those that caused irreparable harm to Jews, and any Latvian citizens, and pledge to work with Latvia to make any needed reforms, reveal any unrevealed truths and work towards education.

Memory is what shapes us. Memory is what teaches us. The gruesome killings of WWII should have been a lesson for humanity, one to help us avoid a reoccurrence of such evils. We as a human race should be able to do better than this, to learn to love, and to live in peace through strength. May we all work together to ensure that such horrors never recur in our world!