

Yad Vashem Chairman Dayan Address to Lithuanian Seimas 21/9/23

Holocaust survivors and their families,
Madam Speaker and members of the Seimas,
Madam Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Abba Kovner, a leader of the Vilna ghetto's partisan fighters, who grew up here in this city, in Vilnius, wrote in one of his books:

*One day my son told me,
"Dad, I' would like to go to Vilna with you sometime,
and you could show me where it all happened."
My son was surprised when I told him:
"Son, that place doesn't exist anymore!"
Strangers live in my house, we can't go see it.
The school where I learned Hebrew has become a lumber shed.
The ghetto was plowed.
There is no memorial to the beit midrash of the Vilna Gaon.
The Jewish streets have been turned into sports fields and public parks...
And because all that is gone, - so Abba Kovner told his son - that place has
no meaning anymore."*

I stand before you today in Vilnius, in the Parliament of a democratic and independent Lithuania, and that is a great privilege for me.
Yet I feel deeply sad, very sad. Sad because the places where Kovner and his fellow Jews – my fellow Jews - lived before the Shoah, the legendary *Yerushalayim de-Lita*, no longer exist.

The *beit midrash* of the Vilna Gaon - is no more.
The old bustling Jewish market - is gone.

Hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian Jews were murdered in this country by the Germans and by their Lithuanian collaborators.
Almost the entire Jewish community of Lithuania became extinct.
The totality of the destruction of such a community, a remarkably vibrant Jewish community, almost like none other,
of such a creative Jewish culture,
annihilated so cruelly, so systematically during the Holocaust -
And to a significant extent *by the **local** population*,
Is characteristically distinct to Lithuania.

Insane, poisonous antisemitic hatred eradicated an entire civilization -
my civilization - here, in your homeland.

To quote the words attributed to prophet Jeremiah in the Book of Lamentations:

עַל אֵלֶּה אָנִי בֹכֶה עֵינֵי עֵינֵי יֵרֶדָה מַיִם כִּי רָחֵק מִמָּנִי מְנַחֵם מְשִׁיב נֶפְשִׁי.

"For these things I weep.
My eye, my eye, runs down with tears,
Because the comforter is far from me."

Still, I dare, with great consideration and respect, to *partially* disagree with Abba Kovner, especially regarding his *final* words: that "*that place has no meaning anymore*"

Because for me, for so many Jews, for Lithuanians, and for others -
That place – call it Vilnius, Vilna, or in its Yiddish pronunciation Vilne - DOES
have meaning, now and in the future! It must!

Madam Speaker, this is my second visit to Lithuania in less than 12 months.

I have met your Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament both in Vilnius and in Jerusalem.

With your Foreign Minister, whose great-grandmother Ona Jablonskyte-Landsbergiene of blessed memory has been recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations. Her son honors us here with his presence.

I am encouraged by their understanding of the issues concerning Holocaust remembrance in Lithuania.

Significant actions are still to take place, but the attitude of the current Lithuanian leadership and of this Seimas, gives me hope.

We are encouraged by gradual but substantial progress made over the years in Lithuania, including important initiatives regarding Holocaust remembrance and preservation of the Jewish heritage, some of them in cooperation with Yad Vashem.

But, unfortunately, I must say that *not yet enough* progress has been made: Though the attitudes expressed, and policies carried out by much of your country's leadership and some resolutions adopted lately by this Seimas are cause for hope, a great deal yet remains to be accomplished. Our task will not be completed until this understanding is not only part and parcel of your leadership, of your Parliament, but trickles down to the very last member of the Lithuanian civil society.

I am inspired to respectfully, but clearly, touch upon this sensitive topic by the example and memory of one my predecessors as Chairman of Yad Vashem: the late Itzhak Rudnicki Arad, also known as Tolka, his *nom de guerre* as a partisan.

Tolka was born in Svencionys, fought in the woods against the Nazis and their collaborators and even infiltrated the Vilna Ghetto to assist.

Dr. Arad became a prominent historian of the Holocaust and contributed greatly to its research and remembrance.

Tolka passed away in May 2021, shortly before I became Chairman of Yad Vashem.

I know that he would have urged me to declare here before you, distinguished Seimas, that an antisemite, especially a murderer of Jews, cannot be considered "otherwise a good person. An antisemite is an antisemite. For sure, he cannot be considered an hero. In addition to refraining from attributing public honor to such butchers, Lithuania must consistently acknowledge that many of the Lithuanian Jews massacred in the Holocaust, died at the hands of their Lithuanian co-nationals, and that Lithuanians also took part in the extermination of Jews in neighboring countries. Such recognition is obviously owed to the Jewish victims, but also, and probably even more, to the present and future generations of Lithuanians. Forgetfulness is a wrong educational option for your youth.

We should show zero-tolerance towards antisemitism, including antisemitism in this chamber.

That zero-tolerance policy must apply also towards glorification of war criminals associated with the massacre of Jews.

Such names as Noreika, Skirpa, Krikštaponis do not add to the honor of your nation, nor to its adherence to international norms of appropriate national remembrance.

Distinguished members of the Seimas, Lithuanian history during the Holocaust indeed contained admirable rescuers.

I myself, together with your Prime Minister, bestowed the title of Righteous Among the Nations on several of those heroes and heroines, here in Vilnius last year, in the Prime Minister's office.

But Lithuanian history during the Holocaust also included vile perpetrators. And of course, many many bystanders.

All must be remembered - accurately, proportionally and in context.

That is precisely why the ongoing efforts to promote accurate Holocaust research, documentation, education, and commemoration are so essential.

In this respect, Yad Vashem pledges to continue working together with Lithuania, with its government, with its Parliament, with its civil society, to accelerate the process and make it more comprehensive.

Madam Speaker, next Sunday, at sundown, on the 10th day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei,
Jews all over the world will mark Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

I will be at home in Israel, living proudly and safely in a sovereign and independent Jewish state.

But having returned barely 48 hours earlier from Vilnius,

I am quite sure that my thoughts during Yom Kippur prayers, will wander to a very different Yom Kippur,
81 years ago.

In 1942, the 21st of September, - today's date - was Yom Kippur.

That same day Herman Kruk wrote in his diary, here in Vilnius:

"Preparations have been made for Yom Kippur.

The high point was to be the prayers in the theater auditorium.

The hall is filled with Jews who have come to observe the holy day.

Everyone is waiting for the chief of the Jewish Council.

He enters and puts on a prayer shawl.

A great lament breaks out.

It is the wind of Ponar, of death,

of the children, women, and men who have been torn away.

Herman Kruk somehow survived the Vilna Ghetto.

But he did not survive the Holocaust.

In September 1944,

two years after he wrote this lamentation of the murder of Lithuanian Jewry,
during Rosh HaShanah of that year, 8 days before Yom Kippur,
one day after he managed to bury his diaries for safekeeping,

and only one day before liberation,
Herman Kruk was murdered by the Nazis in the Lagedi concentration camp, in
Estonia.

Together with the other prisoners, he was forced to carry logs to a pile,
spread them in a layer, lie down naked on them, and executed. The bodies
were to be burned in a massive fire.

Let me conclude with the words of the ancient Jewish prayer
for the souls of those who have passed on:

"Merciful God who dwells above, provide a sure rest on the wings of the
Divine Presence, amongst the holy and pure who shine as brightly as the sky,
to the souls of the six million."

אל מלא רחמים, שוכן במרומים, המצא מנוחה נכונה על כנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים וטהורים, "
כזהר הרקיע מזהירים, את נשמות ששת המיליונים".

Thank you.