The Professor Asked Who Signed. He Did Too.

In 1991, Vytautas Landsbergis signed Lithuania's property restitution and citizenship laws. The latter contained a repatriation condition subsequently struck down by the Constitutional Court. The restitution claims deadline had already expired.

By Grant Arthur Gochin

In 1941, the Nazi occupation and Lithuanian participation in persecution and murder destroyed Jewish lives while Jewish homes, land, shops and belongings passed out of their owners' hands. The Lithuanian Provisional Government excluded Jews by name from the return of nationalized houses. At an August 1 cabinet meeting it decided to adopt regulations stipulating that property Jews had not transferred within two weeks would be confiscated. The people were killed. The property did not disappear. Fifty years later independent Lithuania devised its rules for returning property, and Vytautas Landsbergis signed two of the laws at the center of the resulting exclusion.

On June 18, 1991, Landsbergis signed Law No. I-1454, governing restoration of rights to property nationalized or otherwise unlawfully taken. On December 5 he signed Citizenship Law No. I-2072. The official Lithuanian e-TAR text and its historical PDF give his name on both measures. In 2006 the Constitutional Court found the repatriation condition contained in the 1991 citizenship law incompatible with constitutional equality. The ordinary private restitution claims deadline had expired on December 31, 2001. An unconstitutional exclusion recognized after a deadline does not restore the years in which an heir was unable to apply.

The legend

In 2012, in the introduction to Rezistencijos pradžia. 1941-ųjų Birželis, Landsbergis described the assertion that the Provisional Government had taken Jewish property as "kaip ir legenda," approximately "something like a legend." He argued that Soviet authorities had already nationalized property and that the Lithuanian government had sought to return some of it; those denied restoration, he observed, were not only Jews. The source text does not prove that he denied every instance of seizure. It does establish that he used Soviet nationalization to answer a charge about the Provisional Government's exclusion of Jewish owners. That is precisely the comparison the contemporary documents defeat.

The Provisional Government's own documents answer the professor.

The Law on the Denationalization of Urban Houses and Lots, adopted on July 19, 1941, carries the signatures of acting Prime Minister Juozas Ambrazevičius and the professor's father, Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, Minister of Communal Economy. Its Paragraph 2, as Joseph Levinson's documentary collection renders it, provided that the nationalized houses, lots and farm buildings of "Jews, foreigners, and other natural and legal persons" who "acted against the interests of the Lithuanian people" were "not to be returned to their former owners." Foreigners lost their homes because of their citizenship. Jews lost theirs because they were Jews, including Jews who were Lithuanian citizens. "Not only Jews" is accurate. It answers nothing. An implementing instruction signed by Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (LCVA, f. R-496, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 12) then let co-owners of a building take control of the shares of their Jewish former partners.

The government went further. The minutes of its August 1, 1941 meeting record a decision to adopt Regulations on the Jewish Situation, signed in the published document by acting Prime Minister Ambrazevičius and Interior Minister Jonas Šlepetys. The text provides: “Per tą laiką žydų neperleistas turtas konfiskuojamas.” Property that Jews had not transferred during the stated two-week period was to be confiscated. The record establishes the decision and the text; it does not by itself prove the regulations’ subsequent promulgation or the seizure of any particular house. The words alone destroy the proposition that Jewish property exclusion existed only as a legend.

The son’s law

Nearly fifty years after his father signed the houses law, the Supreme Council adopted Law No. I-1454, on the restoration of ownership rights to real property nationalized under Soviet laws or otherwise unlawfully taken into public ownership. The official English translation on the Seimas register closes with his name: Vytautas Landsbergis, President of the Supreme Council. In 2022, the Seimas enacted that he had exercised the powers of head of state from March 11, 1990, to November 25, 1992. That is the signature of a head of state.

The law rests on one premise: Soviet nationalization did not extinguish the former owner’s claim.

Even the professor’s Soviet-nationalization explanation fails on its own terms. Lithuania’s national encyclopedia describes the October 31, 1940 nationalization measure as applying specified floor-area thresholds to urban houses, as well as additional categories. It did not nationalize every Jewish residence. A Jewish owner whose house was not nationalized could lose it in 1941 without any Soviet transfer of title to reverse. None of this makes Soviet nationalization harmless. It makes nationalization and genocidal dispossession historically distinct. The government’s 1941 rules excluded Jews by name, not merely owners whose Soviet-era title had changed.

Law No. I-1454 then set its own gate. Article 2 restored ownership to a former owner, or to specified heirs, only if that person was a citizen of the Republic of Lithuania and a permanent resident. The provision did not name Jews. It did not need to. In 1991, a Holocaust survivor living in Tel Aviv, Johannesburg or New York stood outside it on the day it was signed. The World Jewish Restitution Organization states that Lithuania’s restitution program “excluded most Lithuanian Jews living abroad” and that the restitution laws “applied only to citizens, thus precluding most foreigners of Lithuanian origin from recovering confiscated property.”

The citizenship gate

Citizenship decided who could enter the restitution process. The citizenship law he signed on December 5, 1991, decided who could obtain citizenship.

The Constitutional Court’s 2006 ruling sets out what that law said. Article 1 recognized prewar citizens and their children and grandchildren as citizens “provided that they have not acquired citizenship of another state.” Article 17 preserved the right to citizenship for prewar citizens living abroad only “provided that they had not repatriated from Lithuania.” Their children kept the right only if born “in Lithuania or in refugee camps.” To use the right, a person had to renounce any other citizenship.

The law did not define "repatriated." The Court found the meaning in the Supreme Council's own drafting record: "It is obvious from the travaux préparatoires of this law that repatriation was understood as departure for one's ethnical homeland." It then described the result: prewar citizens "were grouped according to their ethnical origin and according to the fact for what country—ethnical homeland or other country—they departed from Lithuania."

The destination-based classification was discriminatory in effect. A prewar Lithuanian citizen who moved to a country not classified as an ethnic homeland could be treated differently from someone who had gone to a country defined that way. WJRO reports that Israeli Jews from Lithuania were ineligible for citizenship under the former repatriation provisions because their departure was characterized as a return to their ethnic homeland. Whether a particular applicant qualified also depended on the version of the statute and the individual's circumstances.

In 1994, the Seimas wrote the ethnic-homeland definition into the implementing resolution. On November 13, 2006, the Court held both the 1991 condition and the 1994 definition in conflict with Article 29 of the Constitution, which forbids restricting rights on the ground of nationality or origin, and with the principle of a state under the rule of law.

Before the Court, the Seimas defended the rule. Its representatives argued, as the ruling records, that "repatriation" reflected a person's will "to regard himself as belonging to a concrete ethnical community" and "his refusal to relate himself by the duties with the Republic of Lithuania and the links to faithfulness and trust which arise from them." On that reasoning, a Lithuanian Jew who settled in Israel had walked away from his duty and loyalty to Lithuania by going there. The Court struck the rule down. The argument remains on the record, made in the name of Lithuania's parliament in 2006.

The calendar

The 1997 restitution law dropped the residence requirement and kept the citizenship requirement. Its deadline, December 31, 2001, arrived nearly five years before the Court ruled. A new citizenship law took effect in 2011. In 2016, the Seimas amended it to secure citizenship for Jews who left between the wars and their descendants. None of this reopened the claims. WJRO's own page states: "Lithuania has not reopened the application period for people who were excluded from filing claims based on citizenship."

In December 2022 the Seimas authorized a further €37 million compensation program. Contemporary reporting described €5 million to €10 million potentially available for eligible individual claims, with applications closing at the end of 2023. WJRO called the private awards "symbolic compensation." It did not reopen the ordinary property-restoration claim period or return particular houses to excluded heirs. I documented the citizenship-and-restitution chronology in The Documents Lithuania Demanded Twice. The new accusation concerns the signature at the beginning of this chain and the political responsibility that followed.

What I assert

I do not claim to know what Vytautas Landsbergis privately intended in 1991. He did not write these laws alone; the Supreme Council adopted them. The record does not show that he designed them to keep Jewish property.

It shows this. He signed the restitution law that limited return to resident citizens. He signed the citizenship law whose repatriation condition, according to the Constitutional Court, carried an ethnic-homeland meaning from its own drafting history, and which the Court held unconstitutional. The restitution deadline expired before that ruling. The application period was never reopened for those the citizenship rules had kept out. My assessment is that the two regimes operated together as a system of exclusion for Jewish heirs abroad, whatever any legislator intended. That assessment does not depend on reading his mind. It depends on the statute book.

The 1941 and 1991 laws are not equivalent. In 1941, the Provisional Government excluded Jews by name from a reversal of Soviet confiscation as the genocide of Lithuania's Jews began. In 1991, the restored state wrote a general restitution scheme conditioned on legal status, and a citizenship rule later held unconstitutional kept many Jewish heirs from attaining that status. The principle is not inherited guilt. It is the obligation of a state, and of the men who led it, to examine what their own rules did to families whose ownership histories genocide had already destroyed.

The human consequence should not be buried under the law numbers. In 1941, Jewish families were expelled, confined and murdered; other people occupied houses they could no longer defend. Decades later, a restored state announced a process for returning wrongfully taken property. Its legal conditions left many heirs who had survived abroad outside the process, and later reforms did not give them the expired opportunity back. My judgment is that independence corrected some property injustices while perpetuating others. Those consequences require explanation from the people who set the rules.

The organizations at the table

WJRO documents Lithuania's exclusion on its own country page. On December 20, 2022, it issued a release announcing that WJRO "applauds passage of Lithuanian law on Holocaust era property restitution." The law paid symbolic compensation and left the claims period closed. In that release, Gideon Taylor, then WJRO's Chair of Operations, called it "a very important step to provide symbolic justice." Rabbi Andrew Baker, AJC's Director of International Jewish Affairs and then a co-chair of the Good Will Foundation that distributes the money, said the result came "after lengthy discussions we had with Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė."

On September 30, 2026, I placed eight separate formal letters in a United States Postal Service mailbox. They were addressed to Jewish organizations identified in correspondence about Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys's September 23 New York meeting. My letters to WJRO President Gideon Taylor and AJC CEO Ted Deutch asked who the organizations understood themselves to represent, the source of any authority claimed on behalf of murdered Jews, destroyed communities and heirless property, what diligence they undertook, and what was asked and answered concerning restitution and Holocaust memory. The WJRO letter also pressed the distinction between recognition by a government as a negotiating partner and authorization by the property owners whose interests are invoked. Neither letter specifically questioned Landsbergis's 1991 signatures, the citizenship gate, or the 2001 filing deadline. Their relevance is institutional: who speaks when the owners are dead and their heirs were excluded?

Each letter requested a substantive written response within fourteen calendar days of receipt. As of October 18, 2026, I have received no answer to any of them. I have no delivery receipts

establishing when each arrived, so I do not assert that an organization missed a deadline running from confirmed receipt. The questions remain unanswered. The entire eight-letter packet is public.

Money before truth

WJRO itself has described the compensation as partial: its December 2022 statement acknowledged that the legislation might represent only a fraction of the value of prewar Jewish property. That statement does not establish a comprehensive valuation of every private property loss, and communal and heirless property must not be confused with individual heirs' existing rights. But the language of symbolic compensation admits the central distinction. The state was paying money for injuries that its ordinary restitution process had not cured. WJRO co-founded the Good Will Foundation, which the government designated to receive the payments; AJC's Andrew Baker co-chaired it. I call it pennies on the dollar.

They asked for money. Nothing in the published record shows that they required truth. The published restitution arrangements do not show a negotiated obligation that Lithuania correct its historical account of the Provisional Government's discriminatory property measures. WJRO's December 2022 release expressed hope for continued recognition of the historical dimensions of the tragedy. Hope does not impose a documentary duty. The chronology shows what the hope was worth: the Seimas passed the communal compensation law in June 2011, and in 2012 the man the Seimas would later recognize as Lithuania's head of state called the Provisional Government's taking of Jewish property a legend. I want to know what factual reckoning was requested of Lithuania, what officials promised, and where that promise was recorded.

Compensation can assist survivors and sustain Jewish communal life. It does not establish that excluded private heirs consented to surrender property claims, and the available public material does not show the full content of the negotiations. The organizations should publish what they requested and obtained on historical accountability, identify precisely whom they represented, and explain how they distinguished communal compensation, heirless property and private inheritance. Lithuania cannot purchase an accurate account of 1941 with a limited compensation appropriation.

Holocaust-era property was an open burden on the Lithuanian state, a claim Lithuania had to answer. The negotiators settled it for compensation, and the published settlements made no historical reckoning a condition of payment. That was a victory for the government of Lithuania, and the negotiators delivered it. Now WJRO and AJC appear in Lithuania's photographs as its partners. No truth has been told.

I am a Litvak, and the truth about the Holocaust in Lithuania is the only thing I seek from Lithuania. When some of the organizations involved contacted me and asked me to submit a financial claim, I refused. None of that money is mine, and I do not want it. What they do with the funds is their affair; what they gave away was not theirs to give. I feel betrayed by organizations that treated money as more important than truth. Not one of the eight organizations I wrote to has come to my assistance in seeking the truth from Lithuania.

The second signature

Landsbergis inherited no guilt for his father's decisions, as I wrote in my last article. His public responsibility is his own: the June 1991 restitution law, the December 1991 citizenship law, and his later argument discounting a charge of Jewish property exclusion by reference to Soviet nationalization. Both laws carry his name in Lithuania's official record. The discriminatory repatriation condition was later struck down, but the excluded claimant's restitution deadline was not restored.

My assessment concerns the operation and consequences of the laws, not a claim that I have proved Landsbergis's private intention. The restored state chose to make access to restitution depend on citizenship, while the citizenship law it enacted imposed a repatriation distinction linked to ethnic homeland. For many descendants of Lithuanian Jews abroad, the route back to property was closed before the legal barrier was removed. A head of state cannot answer that record merely by pointing to Soviet nationalization, nor can a historian dismiss the 1941 property orders when his own father's government wrote them. The professor owes the descendants a historically complete answer.

His father signed the exclusion.

The professor signed the conditions of restoration.