LITHUANIA
– A CENTURY OF
REMEMBERING &
FORGETTING

by **Påhl Ruin**

This year Lithuania is celebrating 100 years since its declaration of independence. Some aspects of the century that has passed deserve more attention than they get.

During 1918 – the last chaotic year of the First World War – all three Baltic countries managed to escape the Russian grip and enjoyed some two decades of independence before they came under Russian/Soviet rule again. Despite the fact that the loss of their independence lasted for the following 50 years, all three countries celebrate their centenary this year.

So how are the past 100 years described? I lived in Vilnius, Lithuania, for five of these years (2011–2016), working as a journalist. One of my major interests was precisely the way in which the country portrayed its own history. Over the years I pinpointed facts and covered aspects of this history that were not often highlighted in official speeches or by mainstream media.

In the following I will focus on two topics in the case of Lithuania – the Soviet period and the Jews.

The Soviet period

Some years ago I visited the GDR Museum in Berlin. There you can get an idea of how everyday life was in the communist state – what the homes looked like, what people worked with, what they did in their spare time, what they bought. In Lithuania there is no such museum of everyday life during the Cold War. Why? The period is too close in time, Lithuanians have told me (even though the GDR collapsed at the same time as the Soviet Union crumbled). But they also say that the period is too sensitive to describe in an objective and intellectual manner. Or to put it bluntly, Lithuanians have very diverse opinions about the period.

Approximately every fifth Lithuanian household has stated that they are financially worse off now than they were before independence in 1991. Among these families, there are many who hold positive feelings towards the Soviet period – but such feelings are very provocative among people who lost family members under the oppressive Soviet regime.

At Lithuanian museums depicting the occupation, you learn important things about persecutions, torture and resistance – but not much more. It is simply very difficult to summarize the Soviet era in a comprehensive manner without offending people on one side or the other. So how was Lithuanian society affected by the Soviet occupation, apart from the oppression? Very few historians or other academics have even tried to paint a broad picture, instead looking only at specific areas of society.

One brave historian, Violeta Davoliūtė, wanted to get away from the notion that the Soviet period was nothing more than a dark parenthesis. She argues that the development of a national Lithuanian identity, which began in 1918, did not come to a complete stop between 1940 and 1991 – rather, it continued, but in a different manner. Arguing for Lithuanian independence was of course strictly forbidden – but paying attention to Lithuanian culture, language and history was permitted. It was even encouraged, and the Russians saw this as an important message to the Poles who had occupied the Vilnius area during the interwar period.

This permissive stance from Moscow was utilized by the leadership of the Communist Party in Lithuania. The party was led by a Lithuanian, while the number two always was a Russian. Antanas Sniečkus led the party from 1940 to 1974, the longest

Top row: Partisan leader Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas; Nazi propaganda poster; bombed street in Vilnius 1944.
Second row: Communist leader Antanas Sniečkus; socialist bronze statue; emblem of the Lithuanian SSR.
Third row: Jewish community of Darbėnai; Jewish community of Vilna; Holocaust memorial in Paneriai.
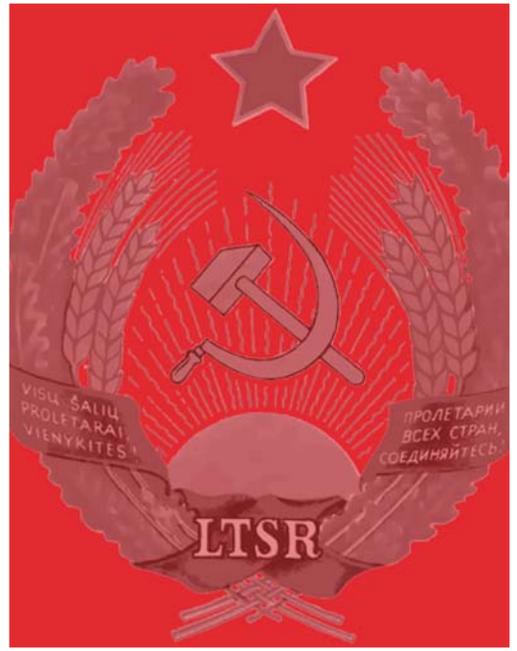
serving Communist leader in Soviet history. He was a completely ruthless man who organized deportations to Siberia and even deported members of his own family. But Sniečkus was also a devoted Lithuanian nationalist who tested the limits of what Moscow could accept.

Sniečkus's long and loyal involvement in the Communist Party, which began between the wars, gave him authority in Moscow – and the opportunity to pursue a nationalist agenda, more nationalist than perhaps in any other Soviet republic. The castle of Trakai, half an hour from Vilnius, is a good example. It was built in the 1300s during the time of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy when the country stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The castle had fallen into decay, so in 1962 Sniečkus ordered a total renovation. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was skeptical at first because the castle was an historical symbol of a free and strong Lithuania – but he still accepted the renovation.

Furthermore, Sniečkus managed to place Lithuanians in most of the central positions in government. And the local Communist Party gained major influence over economic policies during his time in power. Sniečkus was a very important person in every way when it comes to understanding developments in occupied Lithuania – yet only one single biography of him has been published so far. He was both a traitor and a Lithuanian nationalist. The time is evidently not yet ripe to describe all the nuances of his time in power. The historian Davoliūtė is an exception; in her book she describes the thriving climate among intellectuals during the period following Stalin's death when Lithuanian writers, artists and architects were acclaimed for their work all over the Soviet Union – and beyond.

These intellectuals were supported by the Communist Party and worked within the system. When the party eventually cut its ties with Moscow, some of them became leading forces in Sajūdis, the liberation movement. The party and the struggle for freedom became one – which explains how the last Communist leader Algirdas Brazauskas could be elected president of the country in 1993. There were of course other freedom fighters who did not have a background in the Communist Party, which causes tensions up until today – and contributes to the difficulties in describing the communist years in a fair and nuanced way.

An additional reason why Davoliūtė's book became controversial is that she mentions the less favorable aspects of the group known as the Forest Brothers, the partisans fighting the Soviet occupiers in the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike the general image of these freedom fighters, she also emphasizes that some of them murdered innocent people, for example, at least ten newspaper editors. (Read more on the controversial history of the Forest Brothers in *Baltic Worlds* no. 3, 2016).

Over the last couple of years, it has become even more difficult for those who want to give a more multifaceted picture of

the Soviet years – and the reason is called Vladimir Putin. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Moscow's more threatening attitude towards the Baltic countries, the nationalist descriptions of Lithuanian history have gained ground. The most vivid example is the story of the four bronze statues that had adorned the green bridge over the Neris River in central Vilnius since the Soviet period.

These socialist realist sculptures date from the 1950s and represent workers, peasants, students and soldiers. Heated discussions about the very existence of the sculptures had flared up before, but never as intensely as after the annexation of Crimea. The supporters of the statues, for their part, wanted them to remain on the bridge to show that the Soviet era is an integral part of the country's history, no matter how terrible it was, and that the sculptures actually belong to the common cultural heritage. Opponents, for their part, wanted to tear down these symbols of an oppressive occupying power. The mere existence of the sculptures, they argued, reminded people of the suffering during the Soviet period. They also argued that one would never accept Nazi symbols in the public space – so why accept the hammer and sickle?

The heated discussion was closely followed by the Russian propaganda apparatus, which of course supported those in favor of the sculptures – with the result that opponents of the sculptures believed that the supporters were controlled by Moscow. Eventually, one evening in July 2015, the statues were removed from the bridge, citing safety reasons. They did need renovation, but that was not believed to be the main reason for why they were taken away. The following year the Council on Immovable Cultural Heritage stripped the statues of their legal protection as artifacts of cultural value. Members of the Council expressed hope, however, that the statues would end up in a museum where "they can be preserved and presented in the appropriate context". At the time of writing, in May 2018, this has still not happened. One of the historians I spoke with on this matter said with a deep sigh: "It's very difficult to conduct an intellectual discussion about our history in the current political climate."

I HAVE ALSO BEEN STRUCK by a stunningly low level of interest – a lack of curiosity – when it comes to some mind-boggling developments during the Soviet era. I will describe two examples here, the first concerning the Soviet nuclear bases. The Baltic States hosted at least 32 nuclear weapons sites, of which nine were in Lithuania. Ukmergė is a town some 70 kilometers north of Vilnius; the tourist agency's website markets the city's medieval alleys, the churches, the mansions and the beautiful parks. But there is no mention that for three decades the municipality hosted two bases with nuclear weapons. The total blast force of the 16 nuclear warheads corresponded to all the bombs released

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during World War II – times ten. A single warhead had 150 times more explosive force than the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima.

The weapons were dismantled in 1988, in accordance with the disarmament agreement between the Soviet Union and the United states. In 1991 the base was handed over to the newly independent Lithuania in good condition. Since then very few attempts have been made to protect the site for future generations. A Lithuanian friend helped me find the way to the remains of the bigger of the two bases, named after the village of Kopūstėliai. We drove right into the forest; there were no signs or indications where to turn. Well hidden behind trees we found one of the two hangars where the 22 meter long rockets were stored. I climbed through a gaping hole on the short side, stepped over a burnt car tire and entered the damp darkness of the hangar.

When the order came from Moscow, the nuclear warheads were to be picked up from a bunker a few kilometers away and attached to the rockets. Then the rockets would be rolled out to the firing point one hundred meters in front of the hangar. I could still see an annular structure in the asphalt where the rockets were to be erected, fueled and fired. It has not been confirmed, but one rumor says that the goal of these rockets was the destruction of London.

The mayor's office in the newly renovated town square is only five kilometers away, even if it felt like five hundred. Mayor Algirdas Kopustas was evidently embarrassed when discussing the ruins of the base. When asked how they could accept the decay of the historic site, he came up with a very thoughtful answer: "We've had our hands full with the present; we've had no time or resources left for history". The mayor became inspired when I described how at least one other municipality hosting a former nuclear base (Plunge, in northwestern Lithuania) has received EU funds for renovation. Since my visit in Ukmergė, an organization commemorating the Forest Brothers has started using the ruins for their activities, but nothing has been done to restore the memory of the buildings' original purpose.

My second concrete example of the lack of interest in fascinating aspects of the Soviet era is from a dinner table conversation. The person beside me at the table, CEO Algirdas Juozapavičius of Light Conversion, had just won a prize after his laser company had succeeded in entering new markets in Asia. He told me how independence and the introduction of a market economy made it possible for him to start the company in the 1990s. But he also told me that the company would never have seen the light of the day had he not learned the skills of laser technology at the Department of Physics at Vilnius University in the 1970s. In the Soviet Union, Moscow decided where to allocate the funds for research in the whole empire – and when it came to laser technology, Vilnius was the choice. Juozapavičius described how he and his prominent colleagues at the Physics department were invited to international conferences and started research collaborations in countries such as Germany and Sweden.

In Vilnius today there is a cluster of more than 20 laser companies. They have formed an organization which published a pamphlet (in English) a couple of years ago to describe the success of the companies. In it they wrote, among other things, that in 2016 they will celebrate the 50th anniversary of "the development of Lithuania's first laser".

"Lithuania's first"? Yes, in one sense it is true: the first laser was developed in occupied Lithuania. But would an independent Lithuania have been able to conduct research at that level? It is of course possible, but not likely. All experience shows that groundbreaking research is conducted in large or rich countries.

At the end of the dinner, Juozapavičius put his head closer to mine, and said in a lower voice:

"Some have difficulties accepting it, but not everything was bad during the Soviet era".

The Jews

One of Lithuania's leading politicians in the early 21st century – conservative former prime minister Andrius Kubilius – once told me that in 1991 he did not even know that Vilnius had a rich Jewish culture for 600 years. He did not know that the capital's population had consisted of 40 percent Jews when the Second World War broke out. Or that 95 percent of the country's 220,000 Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Or that the killings were largely managed by the Lithuanians themselves, with more or less pressure from the Germans.

The former prime minister was far from alone in this ignorance. The vast majority of Lithuanians were ignorant after the long Soviet occupation during which the Russian – and Lithuanian – party leaders gladly spoke of Nazi crimes, but said very little about the Jewish victims. In a forest some ten kilometers west of Vilnius, in Paneriai ("Ponar" in Yiddish), between 70,000 and 100,000 people were executed, most of whom were Jews. The monument, hidden under tall pine trees, says a lot about how these crimes were described during the Soviet era - here lie the "victims of fascism's terror". This monument from the 1950s was joined in the 1990s by a new monument which underlined the identity of the victims – but apart from that, not much has been done to pay attention to the second largest execution site in this part of Europe after Babi Yar in Ukraine. The small museum looks largely the same as when it was built in 1985.

A couple of years ago I decided to test how a temporary foreign visitor without a car, curious about Paneriai and the holocaust in Lithuania, is treated in Vilnius. At the tourist office in the old town, they told me that there are no brochures about the execution site or how to get there. Finally, the woman behind the counter succeeded in printing out some pages with insufficient information from the Internet. It turned out that the museum cannot be visited spontaneously during the winter months; one has to call first so that they can come and open it. "But the train journey there is just over ten minutes long and costs only 60 cents", she said.

A few days later, I took the train to Paneriai with one of Lithuania's leading experts in the Jewish history of the country and the Holocaust, Rūta Puišytė, Deputy Director of the Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University. In the 1990s, she wrote a dissertation that not only mentioned the Jewish victims in her father's hometown of Jurbarkas, she also named 30 Lithuanian perpetrators. It caused huge reactions.

"'How can you accuse our partisans of killing Jews?' a history professor said, promising to 'crush me'," said Puisyte, while the train was leaving Vilnius Central Station.

Where we got off there were no signs to Paneriai; we had to ask a lady the way. It was obvious that very few people try to get there using public transport. Neat walking paths lead down to the museum; the entire site was refurbished in 1985 and is well maintained. In the 1980s five pits were renovated; on the edges of these pits the victims were lined up and shot.

"But the renovation is problematic," said the guide, Mantas Sikšnianas, who opened the museum for us. "One of the pits never existed in reality and another three or four pits have been overgrown by weeds. Additionally, the gorge through which the victims were forced to walk towards their death is gone". Once inside the museum, we were told that the killings here already started in July 1941, just a few weeks after the German invasion, and that the mass burning of the bodies began in 1943. I noted this while my fingers stiffened around the pen in the chilly temperature inside the premises. They could not afford heating for temporary visitors.

"Our visitors are mostly foreigners, especially from Israel and Poland. Some Lithuanian school classes also come, but not so many", the guide told us. Puišytė got upset when she heard this:

"They focus too much on foreign tourists. Make a museum for me! For us!"

DURING MY YEARS in the country, I heard that same message from many Lithuanians, especially from young people. One of them is Milda Jakulyte-Vasil. She was 12 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed and when it became possible to lift the lid on all that had been kept secret. But during the following seven years as a pupil in a free and independent Lithuania, she was never taught that tens of thousands of Jews had been killed in her own country. And even worse, the subject was not raised in her subsequent university studies in history. It was not until she started working at the Jewish museum in Vilnius that she learned what had happened.

"Among other things, I learned that over 2,000 Jews were murdered in my hometown of Kėdainiai near Kaunas. When I told my mother, she said that she had never heard of it."

Jakulyte-Vasil finally decided to map – and to visit – all execution sites. Earlier research had shown that there were around two hundred such sites; eventually she found 227, and these were presented in her *Lithuanian Holocaust Atlas* in 2012. Some of the sites had been totally abandoned, while others had been taken care of by local authorities or volunteers. Her work was groundbreaking, but she did not get much support from her closest circles.

"My friends thought I was weird, and my family did not understand why I did it. And my brother-in-law accused me of 'standing on the side of the Jews'."

"THERE WAS AN ADDITIONAL HATRED OF THE JEWS BECAUSE MANY BELIEVED IN THE NAZI PROPAGANDA THAT EQUATED BOLSHEVIKS WITH JEWS."

The sensitive issue of Lithuanians' involvement in the murders led to a toxic debate in the 1990s when the rest of the world demanded that the Lithuanian people deal with their history – while many Lithuanians felt that the outside world did not pay attention to their own suffering during communism. It is of course both pointless and destructive to continue this competitive martyrdom. In addition, it is plainly wrong to split the suffering into two different groups of victims – Stalin also sent thousands of Jews to Siberia.

The debate is now less intense, partly because the Lithuanian state has taken several commendable steps both to pay attention to the Holocaust and to spread the knowledge of Jewish culture in Lithuania. At the tourist office, they have published a brochure about "Jewish Vilnius" since 2010, and the booklet "Let's explore Jewish history and heritage in Lithuania" came out in 2015. The state has allocated funds for research in the field, which resulted in, for example, Jakulyte-Vasil's *Holocaust Atlas*. Furthermore, an agreement has been reached on compensation for property lost by Jewish organizations during the war, and EU funds have been used to renovate synagogues. And in the schools more teachers have been trained in the history of the Holocaust.

The state has undeniably clear ambitions; the problem is that this does not always translate into action on the local level – the case of the courageous history teacher Genute Žilytė in Panevėžys illustrates the dilemma. I met her some two years ago:

"The school leadership thought it was enough to teach about the Holocaust in general", she said while showing me around town in her car. "But I also wanted to talk about the massacres in our country and here in our own city."

The largest invasion of the Second World War – Germany's attack on the Soviet Union – began on June 22, 1941. After six days, German troops had reached Panevėžys with little more than 20,000 inhabitants in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. Half of the city's inhabitants were Jews; when the summer was over, almost every one of them had been shot. But already in late June, before the Germans initiated the massacres, Jews were murdered in pogroms across the city.

"Yet today we don't know how many people were killed during these pogroms. Some tens? A hundred? The issue was silenced during the Soviet occupation, and since independence it has been taboo to talk about it".

On our way to the largest massacre site, Žilytė pointed to a side street lined with low wooden houses.

"Most of the people who used to live there were Jews. An elderly Lithuanian lady told me how she, as a 5-year-old, witnessed how a Jewish couple and their two children in one of the houses were murdered by their Lithuanian neighbors".

How could that happen? And why was it so easy for the Germans to find willing shooters when the assassinations started?

Where did this hate come from? The researchers have no clear answers, but speak of widespread anti-Semitism, just as in many other parts of Europe. In the Baltic countries there was an additional hatred of the Jews because many believed in the Nazi propaganda that equated Bolsheviks with Jews – and since the Bolsheviks took their independence away from them, it was logical to turn against the Jews.

We got out of the car and walked into an enchanting forest full of singing birds. Hidden under the foliage, surrounded by a worn fence from the Soviet era, there were two refilled pits where 7,523 people met their death on August 23, 1941.

"Here we recently found a tooth," said Žilytė, pointing into the grass next to one of the mass graves.

We stood silent for a moment before I asked: How is it even possible for the children to grasp the extent of the hideous acts committed here?

"They must know about this, it's part of their history. But I'm careful about the violent details. And I also tell them about the heroic Lithuanians who hid Jews at risk of their own lives".

She walked over to the small memorial and cleaned some weeds from the place where her students have placed flat stones decorated with typical Jewish names.

"The Holocaust is just part of my teaching, I focus at least as much on Jewish history and traditions. The Jewish culture is part of our own country's history; it is tragic that people know so little about it."

She had invited teachers from some 40 schools in the region to tell them about her teaching, to try to inspire them to follow her example. But only three of them had shown an interest in coming.

"The question is still so sensitive," she said with a sad expression.

A MORE CURRENT example of the sensitivity of the issue is the reception in Lithuania of the book *Our People: Travels with the Enemy* by Rūta Vanagaitė. It came out in 2016, but the impact of the publication can still be felt. Just like Jakulyte-Vasil, she visited mass-execution sites and she interviewed elderly witnesses to the massacres. Being a popular author, not an historian, she reached a larger audience on this topic than anyone had done before. And she could add the chilling fact that her own uncle and grandfather were among those who played a role in the killings.

As an example of the extreme delicacy of the issue, she caused an uproar in the general public when – on rather loose grounds – she questioned the hero status of one of the anti-Soviet resistance leaders. She did not claim that he had taken part in any atrocities against Jews, but questioning his character and his legacy was enough for the bookstores to take her books off the shelves and for her publishing company to drop her.

"Lithuanians are proud of being the most stubborn resisters of the Soviets", she said recently in an interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. "Their treatment at Soviet hands after the war has left deep scars and made them resistant to the idea that they were anything but victims."

But the interest in getting to know more about the history of

"Not everything was bad during the Soviet era", said Algirdas Juozapavičius, CEO of Light Conversions.

"The Jewish culture is part of our own country's history; it is tragic that people know so little about it." said history teacher Genute Žilytė.

"I learned that over 2,000 Jews were murdered in my hometown of Kėdainiai near Kaunas", said Milda Jakulyte-Vasil, author of the *Lithuanian Holocaust Atlas*.

"My father talked about how 'the Lithuanians killed my family' when he was drunk", said Jewish artist and writer Arkadijus Vinokuras.

PHOTO: VIDMANTAS BALKŪNAS

the Jews and their fate is nevertheless growing in Lithuania. A few years ago Jakulyte-Vasil took part in initiating a movement that has spread around the country – to publicly read the names of the thousands of victims every year on the evening before Lithuania's national Holocaust memorial day on September 23.

In 2015 the ceremony took place for the first time in the small town of Jonava. The initiator there was the radio journalist Giedrė Čiužaitė:

"As a 13-year-old in Jonava, I was strongly affected by Anne Frank's diary. But it was not until much later that I found out that Jewish children had been hiding in the same way in my hometown as well. Children who grow up in Jonava today should not need to suffer from such ignorance."

She told me that it had been a solemn ceremony with some 40 people in the audience.

"A retired historian claimed that we were wrong about the number of Jews killed, that there were only 300 as our local museum has pointed out for years. But thanks to the *Holocaust Atlas* and the work of other researchers, we can conclude that 2,108 people were killed. We read the names of about half that number; we will probably never know the names of the remaining ones."

That same year, names were read out loud at a café in Vilnius and I volunteered to read for five minutes or so. It was a very touching moment, and in the light from a burning candle I was struck by the large proportion of very small children among the victims. Many were born several years later than my own mother, who still lives a very active life today, in her 80s.

It was my journalist friend Audronė Čepkauskaitė who inspired me to join the reading. She said something deeply noteworthy about this process of finding out more of what really happened:

"Above all, it can give us a peace of mind. We had a Jewish population, and this population was wiped out. As long as this fact is not present in each Lithuanian's image of her own country, we will be forced to continue to live with a big and painful void."

THE ARTIST AND WRITER Arkadijus Vinokuras is one of the approximately 3,500 Jews in Lithuania today. He lost his grandfather's family when the Kaunas ghetto was liquidated. His father was sent both to Mauthausen and Buchenwald, but survived and returned to Lithuania.

"My father never told us anything about the war years, except when he was drunk. Then he talked about how 'the Lithuanians killed my family'."

Vinokuras grew up in Soviet Lithuania where the fate of the Jews was a non-issue. He protested against the dictatorship, was detained, and was forced to eventually migrate to Israel where he met a Swedish woman, which led to a life in Sweden. In 2002 he returned to Lithuania and was struck by widespread anti-Semitism.

"Anti-Semitic articles that would never be printed in Sweden appeared here. And when I started publishing myself, I was exposed to anti-Semitic attacks on the Internet. But it has improved over the years. Slowly, society is beginning to look at us Jews and our history in a different way."

He gave the example of a book about the city of Utena that was published some years ago. Before the war more than half of the population was Jewish, Jews had dominated the city for hundreds of years – yet only three sentences were devoted to the Jews in a book of 370 pages.

"And not a word about the city's own Nobel laureate Bernard Lown! He was born in Utena and emigrated to the United States as a 13-year-old in the 1930s. In 1985 he was awarded the Peace Prize on behalf of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War."

On the topic of the Lithuanian state commemorating Jews who were born in the country, things have also changed over the years. No less than 26 "Litvaks" – Jews with roots in the Lithuanian Grand Duchy – have received a Nobel Prize. But no one was awarded it as a Lithuanian citizen. When Michael Levitt, born in the Lithuanian city of Plunge, received the award in chemistry in 2013, he was congratulated by Lithuania's foreign minister who titled him "my countryman".

As an additional indicator of the state being more interested than before in the Jewish history of the country, there are concrete plans to restore the killing sites in Paneriai and replace the museum with something more modern and welcoming. The plans had already started at the time of our visit that cold winter day. The Jewish Museum told me at the time that they had just gotten hold of aerial photographs from the German Luftwaffe showing exactly where the original pits had been located.

When I contact Rūta Puišytė for this article, she tells me that archeological research has been carried out over the last two years, and that the construction of a new exhibition area can start very soon.

"This should of course have been done many years ago, but I am happy that it eventually is taking place."

When the architectural proposals for the museum were presented some years ago, I also ran into Puišytė; this was before our trip together to Paneriai. She told me of a discussion she had a moment before with an official from one of the state ministries.

"He saw that I was very interested in the architectural drawings on display, so he put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'I promise, this will be a worthy memorial for all you Jews'. This is sadly still the notion, that if you are engaged in the Jewish history of our nation, you have to be a Jew. But the Jewish history is part of the history of all Lithuanians!" ✕

Påhl Ruin is a Swedish freelance journalist previously living in Vilnius.

> ## "THEIR TREATMENT AT SOVIET HANDS AFTER THE WAR HAS LEFT DEEP SCARS AND MADE THEM RESISTANT TO THE IDEA THAT THEY WERE ANYTHING BUT VICTIMS."