

Understanding 'Double Genocide': a lethal new threat to Holocaust memory and honesty

Dovid Katz



Photo: Ida Olniński

Dovid Katz

Australians, Americans, Britons and others who are proud of a parent or grandparent who fought in the Second World War, proud of the Allies' defeat of Hitler, have ample reason to be wary now.

One of the Eastern European far right's priorities, notwithstanding the current economic challenges, is to 'rubbish' the Allies' triumph, and rewrite the history of the war to suit local ultranationalism. The ongoing campaign seeks

to rewrite Second World War history, not just in Eastern Europe but for the world at large, by mitigating Nazism, insisting that communism's evils be proclaimed 'equal' to Nazism by European Parliament resolutions, and trashing the Allied war effort as one that did nothing but replace one tyranny with another 'equal' one in the east.

Make no mistake, the peoples of Eastern Europe suffered enormously under communism for decades after the war, while we westerners were enjoying unbridled freedom and prosperity. It is absolutely right that they should now call for thorough investigation of the crimes committed by communist regimes. But the demand that the entire European Union (EU) declare Nazism and communism to be 'equal' is something else entirely.

Perhaps you must actually live in Eastern Europe to appreciate the nuances. Let it be stressed that none of this is about the fine, tolerant, welcoming and hardworking people of the region, among whom I have lived happily for over a decade, in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. It is rather about the abuses of power elites, in government, academia, media, the judiciary and so forth, whose agendas are often opaque even to locals, and all the more inscrutable to unsuspecting foreigners.

The new ultranationalists are neither skinheads nor toughs. On the contrary, the elites are suave, silver-tongued, charming and highly educated, especially about history – not in the open-minded sense of relishing civic debate between competing ideas, but in the sense of insisting upon a single, uniform history as a product for export, and being quick to stigmatise any who might disagree as unfit, disloyal or even 'communist'.

In 2009, the Lithuanian parliament actually debated proposals to criminalise opinions that disagree with the 'double genocide' model of the Second World War and who would question, for example, whether Soviet misrule constituted 'genocide'. In June 2010, the Hungarian parliament passed such a law shortly after the right-wing government came to power (maximum jail time for offenders: three years), and within weeks the Lithuanian parliament followed suit (with a mere two years of jail time to folks who hold the opinion that the Holocaust was the one genocide in twentieth century Lithuania).

But what actually is the ultranationalist version of history?

In the case of the 'anti-Russian' countries in Eastern Europe – the far east of the European Union, particularly the Baltic states, plus the western, nationalist part of Ukraine, among others – there is a reluctance to own up to any complicity with the Holocaust. The percentages of the Jewish populations killed in the Baltics were the highest in Europe. Further west, collaboration had meant ratting to the Gestapo or taking neighbours to the train station to be deported. In these countries, it meant something different. Many thousands of enthusiastic local volunteers did most of the actual shooting of their country's Jewish citizens, whose remains lie scattered in hundreds of local killing pits. In Lithuania and Latvia, the butchery started before the Nazis even arrived, initiated by nationalist thugs who were in 2011 honoured by some of the highest echelons of society as 'anti-Soviet freedom fighters' (ignoring the slight detail that the Soviets were fleeing the German invasion, not them).

Of course there were exceptions – those Baltic citizens who showed inspirational courage by risking their and their families' lives to rescue a Jewish neighbour. They are the *real* Baltic heroes of the Second World War who should have been honoured and remembered by their governments in 2011, on the seventieth anniversary, in lieu of the orgy of commemorations for the killers.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of democratic states in the region, individual citizens hailing from each country's majority made spirited strides toward unearthing the truth. Some remarkable non-government organisations were set up. But near the turn of the millennium, the three Baltic governments colluded to set up state-financed commissions to study 'as a single topic' the Nazi and communist legacies (known informally as 'red-brown commissions'). The most notorious of these bodies, headed by a right-wing-compliant and ambitious

Jewish politician (recently rewarded with the chairmanship of the parliament's foreign affairs committee), has been Lithuania's International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania. Built into the Orwellian name of the inquiry are the foregone conclusions: first, the desired equivalence or parallelism of Nazi and Soviet crimes; second, the limitation to consider the crimes of 'occupation regimes', leaving little scope for investigation of the genocide committed by local forces, in some cases before the occupation began; third, the seeking of solace in 'international' recognition for that which needs to be faced up to nationally and locally. The commission is cosily housed in the prime minister's office, turning history into a PR department of the government.

To 'fix' the region's unfixable Holocaust history, an array of cunning ruses was brought into play. The very definition of genocide was inflated by local legislation in this part of the world to include wrongful deportation, imprisonment or attempts to rid society of a certain class, thereby 'legally' placing communist oppression in the same category as Nazism. The state-funded Genocide Museum on the main boulevard of Vilnius does not mention the word 'Holocaust'; it is all about Soviet crimes; and even flaunts antisemitic exhibits. It is widely repeated locally that the Soviets committed genocide first, in 1940 (when the Baltic states were wrongfully incorporated into the USSR, less than a year after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and many innocent people were deported or imprisoned), and that this was followed by some kind of opposite and equal reaction in 1941, when the German invaders and Balts began their genocide of the Jewish population.

According to this narrative, all is equal; everybody is even. All that remained was to sell this new history to the naive westerners whose mind is on other things these days.

But in Lithuania, the process went further. State prosecutors, egged on by the antisemitic press, opened 'war crimes investigations' against Holocaust survivors who are alive today only because they managed to flee the ghetto and the murder awaiting them, to join up with anti-Nazi partisans in the forests who were, yes, supported by the Soviet Union. (There were, alas, no US or British forces in these parts.) They are heroes of the free world, but in the far east of the European Union, where a not-so-latent pro-fascist sentiment grips segments of the elite, they are the villains. Almost as if someone is unhappy that any Jew at all survived the Holocaust.

One of the accused survivors, Dr Yitzhak Arad (born in 1926), a gentle scholar who was founding director of Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, was duped into joining the Lithuanian red-brown commission (to give it legitimacy) before being absurdly accused himself. Then, in May 2008, at the low point of modern Lithuanian history, armed police came looking for two incredibly valorous women veterans: Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky (born 1922), librarian of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, and Rachel Margolis (1921), a biologist and Holocaust scholar. Margolis is especially loathed by proponents of the 'double genocide' industry because she rediscovered, deciphered and published the long-lost diary of a Christian Pole, Kazimierz Sakowicz. Sakowicz, witness to tens of thousands of murders at the Ponár (Paneriai) site outside Vilnius, recorded accurately that most of the killers were enthusiastic locals. Now resident in Rehovot, Israel, she is unable, on the eve of her ninetieth birthday, to return to her beloved hometown in Lithuania for fear of prosecutorial harassment.

Why would prosecutors, who have yet to level a single charge, go after the victims instead of the perpetrators? In fact, this has been all about defamation and manipulation of history, not prosecution. When it came to the perpetrators, fifteen of whom were deported from the United States after being stripped of citizenship, Lithuanian prosecutors were bereft of any energy or motivation.

With unbridled audacity, the Baltic states, working closely with far-right parties in other 'new accession states' (Poland and the Czech Republic among them), have found Useful Idiots (UIs) in the European Parliament for spreading their underlying view that the Nazis were, in effect, liberators of their countries from the yoke of communism. The entire effort is often artfully covered for by Useful Jewish Idiots (UJIs), Jewish dignitaries and scholars from around the world invited to Lithuania and neighbouring countries for



(l-r) Phillip Maisel, Dovid Katz, Pearl Recht

conferences, honours, research opportunities and an array of enjoyable junkets.

The East European far-right cabal's greatest success to date is the Prague Declaration of June 2008, which demands that the entire European Union recognise communism and fascism (Nazism) as a 'common legacy', and that 'all European minds' think that way. Its practical demands include a new Nuremberg-type tribunal for trying the criminals of communism and, unbelievably, a demand for the 'overhaul of European history textbooks' to reflect the revisionist history. This last demand was the subject of the group's 2011 meetings in Brussels, where they pursue what is now innocuously called 'The Prague Process', and sometimes referred to by other pleasant-sounding names, including 'reconciliation of European histories', 'equality of victimhood' and more.

One of the reasons that all this progressed without scrutiny can be found in the Prague Declaration's list of signatories. They include some major anti-Soviet icons who stood up bravely for their nations' independence as the USSR crumbled, and subsequently helped forge solid democracies. The heroic roles of Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic and Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania in their nations' re-emergence remain undiminished. But that does not mean that, two decades later, we must be afraid to disagree with them when, following the general political trend in the region, they veer rightwards or unwittingly give succour to the ultranationalists.

By denigrating the Allies' war effort against Hitler, the easterners go beyond whitewashing their own Holocaust

histories. The entire 'red-equals-brown' movement within eastern Europe panders to base instincts, which can be politically useful in hard times. It has hit upon a convenient way to stigmatise not only 'Russians' (often a cover term for Russian-speakers of many ethnic backgrounds, including Roma), but also today's Russia. These nations have every right to fear Russia and they deserve firm western support for their permanent security and independence. This legitimate concern must not be compromised by the attempts of some at historical falsification and the peddling of contemporary racism and antisemitism.

The anti-Russianism in Eastern Europe is however not as strong as the antisemitism that accompanies Holocaust revisionism. In 2011, Latvia and Estonia held events actually honouring their countries' Waffen SS units, and the Lithuanian parliament sponsored a series of events, including an international conference and a documentary film, to rehabilitate the murderous Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF), who started butchering Jewish neighbours before the Germans even arrived. In 2010, a court legalised public swastikas (less than two years after the parliament forbade 'Nazi and Soviet symbols' – so much for the 'equality' in play). One of the official Genocide Centre's 'chief specialists' helped organise the March 2011 neo-Nazi parade. The incredible list goes on.

Holocaust denial *per se*, in respectable Western civilization, died its death back in 2000 when the London High Court

ruled for Professor Deborah Lipstadt, throwing out the libel suit brought by denier David Irving. It has since been replaced by a much more dangerous and complex incarnation, which I have called 'Holocaust obfuscation'. The Holocaust obfuscation movement is a far-right, antisemitic, state-funded effort to rewrite history and confuse perpetrators and victims for ultranationalist motives. It is spreading dangerously from the Baltics and Eastern Europe to various susceptible circles in the West, where clueless historians, public figures and politicians can readily be persuaded to join a seemingly exciting revisionism.

Each state may in some sense preach and teach what it likes within its borders, though within the European Union and NATO the freedom to disagree must be upheld by law and in practice, and the tolerance for adulation of fascism should be zero.

In all scenarios, the unseemly revisionism promoted in some eastern EU states must not be granted entrance to the West via the back doors of Brussels and Strasbourg.

The time has come to stand up and say no!

Dovid Katz, who was professor of Yiddish language, literature and culture at Vilnius University from 1999 to 2011, is editor of the web journal www.DefendingHistory.com. His personal website is www.DovidKatz.net.

Moshe Ajzenbud: keeping Yiddish alive

Ruth Mushin

Moshe Ajzenbud has edited the Yiddish pages of Centre News for many years. This profile is in honour of the contribution Moshe has made to the Jewish Holocaust Centre and to Yiddish literature, and in honour of the 100th anniversary of the Jewish Library and Cultural Centre 'Kadimah'.

Moshe Ajzenbud was born in 1920 in Niesviesz, a small town in east Poland near the Russian border. He was educated in a Yiddish secular school, a Polish government school and later a technical college in Pinsk.

Originally part of Byelorussia, Niesviesz was under Polish rule between 1919 and 1939. As part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, it came under Soviet control in 1939. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Moshe escaped deep into Central Asia with his father and brother. There he was sent to work in a labour camp in Siberia and was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for organising a general strike in the iron ore quarry. He was freed during an amnesty in 1945. In that year he was also reunited with Leah, whom he had met in Pinsk in 1936. They married and returned with Moshe's father and brother to Poland. His mother and sister perished in the Holocaust.



Photo: Abhijit Chattaraj

Moshe Ajzenbud

Understanding that Poland would never be truly independent under Soviet rule, Moshe and Leah decided to leave after staying in Poland for only one month. Without passports, visas or money, they joined other survivors in making their way across Czechoslovakia and Austria to the American Occupation Zone of Germany. There they were directed to the German holiday resort of Bad Reichenhall where they spent the next four years in a displaced persons camp. It was there that Moshe began to write, hoping to shed the burden of pain and to voice his protest against the needless suffering to which he had been subjected during the war. His first short stories were published in the Parisian *Notre Vox*, a Yiddish daily where he worked as a local correspondent.

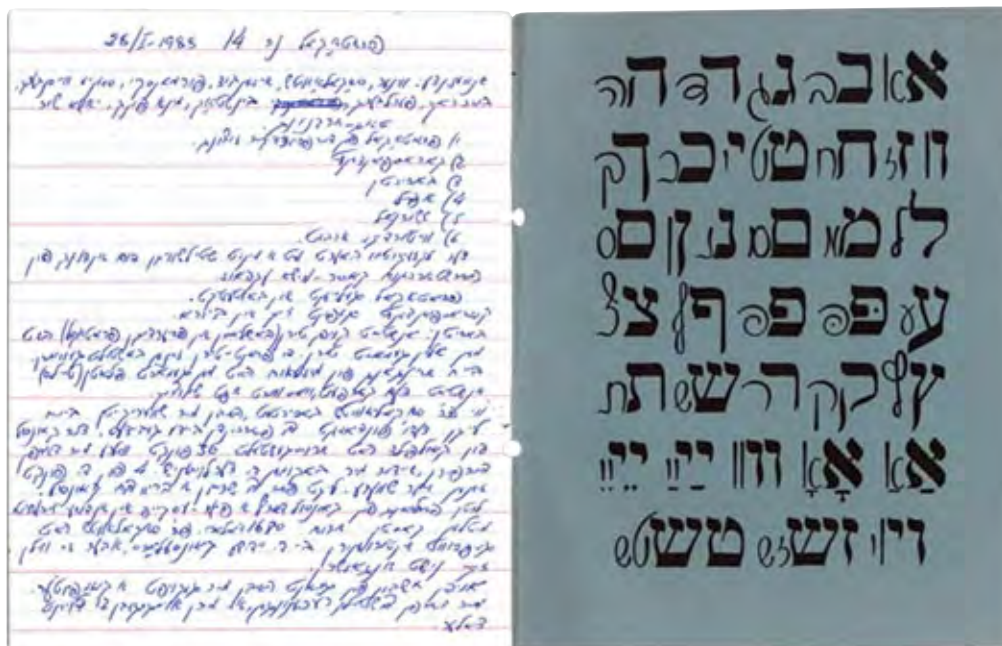
A fitter and turner, Moshe was accepted as part of Australia's migration program in Melbourne as a skilled migrant. Moshe and Leah arrived in Melbourne in 1950 and, after spending the first month at the Bonegilla Commonwealth Immigration Centre in Albury, they secured housing and employment in Melbourne. Moshe worked first as a metal tradesman and later as a storeman. Despite the usual difficulties of settling into a new country, he continued writing, and quickly became involved in Melbourne's Jewish community.

In 1951 he began writing for the *Jewish Post* and became a regular contributor to the Jewish press. He was the founding editor of *Yiddishe Bleter*, the Yiddish section of the *Melbourne Chronicle*, as well as the editor of the Yiddish pages of the Jewish Holocaust Centre's *Centre News*. His books of fiction include *Gelebt hinter kratn (Lived behind bars)* (1956), translated by Leah in 1986 as *The Commissar Took Care*, and *Yugneleche blondzenishn (Dilemmas of youth)* (1973). He has published three collections of short stories: *Nyesviezher Yidn: dertseylungen (Jews of Niesviez; Stories)* (1965), *Aleyn in gezeml: dertseylungen (Lonely in a*

been Honorary Secretary of the Bund and spent 15 years as Yiddish presenter at the ethnic radio station 3ZZZ.

Moshe is passionate about keeping Yiddish alive. As he says: 'It has been the living, vibrant and acknowledged language of generations of Jews, whether religious or secular. In the *cheders* and *yeshivot* of Eastern Europe the Scriptures were taught in Yiddish or in Yiddish translation. Yiddish was the language of the majority of Jews who were confined to the ghettos and camps, who were involved in uprisings and who went on their final journey. It has also crept into the everyday language in many lands, especially in America and England and, to a degree, in Australia.'

Moshe became involved in the Jewish Holocaust Centre as a representative of the Kadimah before the Centre's foundation in 1984, and was Honorary Secretary on the first Executive committee. When the Holocaust Centre was built, Yiddish was the *lingua franca* of the founders. When they established the Centre, they felt that they should not only remember the tragic deaths of the victims, but also had a duty to preserve and memorialise their language – a proud,



Minutes of the Jewish Holocaust Centre Executive 1985, handwritten in an exercise book

crowd: *Stories*) (1970), and *Pnina, un andere dertseylungen (Pnina, and other tales)* (2006). As well as his works of fiction, he has written a study of Oskar Rapoport's works entitled *Nusakh Y Rapoport (Oskar Rapoport's Style)* (1967), and studies of the Jewish Folk Centre in Sydney and the Bund and the David Herman Theatre in Melbourne: *50 yor Yidisher folks-tsenter in Sydney (50 Years of the Jewish Folk Centre in Sydney)* (1991), *60 Yor Bund in Melburn, 1928–1988 (The History of the Bund in Melbourne 1928–1988)* (1996) and *Di Geshikhthe fun Dovid Herman Teater (The History of the David Herman Theatre)* (1998). He has also been a contributor to the *Bibliographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature*.

Moshe has had a distinguished career as a Yiddish educator. He began teaching Yiddish at the Sholem Aleichem Sunday School in 1958, a position which he held for around twenty years. In 1984, he became its headmaster. He has played an important role in the Jewish Cultural Centre and National Library Kadimah where he was President from 1988–1992. He was also Honorary Secretary from 1979-80 and again in 1999–2002, and Chairman of the Kadimah Cultural Committee from 1993–98. He has also

living language that had inspired so many.

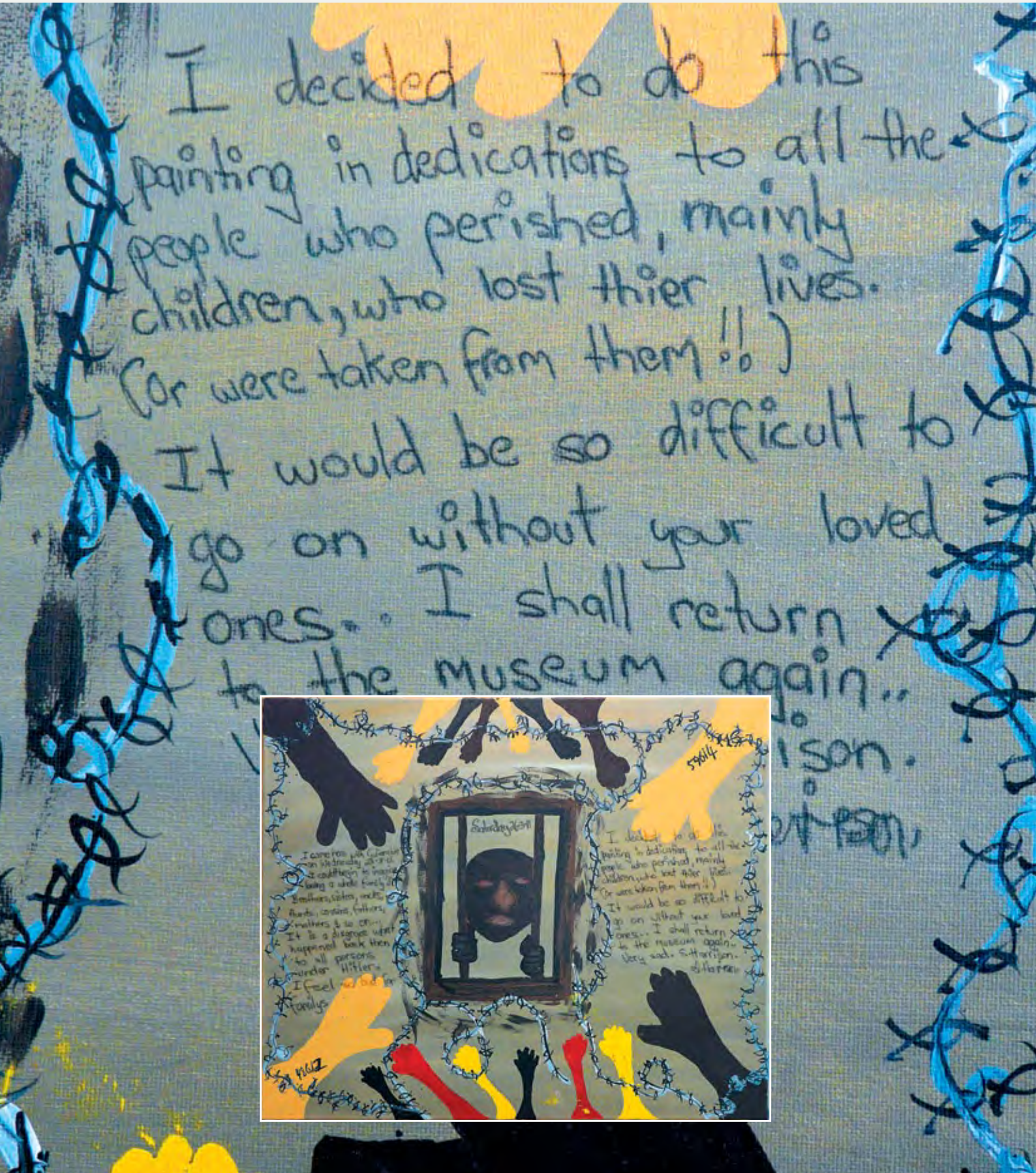
The first meetings at the Centre were in Yiddish, and the minutes were written in Yiddish. Exhibition captions were in Yiddish and English, and Yiddish was always heard around the Centre. However, as newer, younger volunteers and staff became involved, English began to take over as the main language. One thing that has not changed, however, is the three-page Yiddish section of *Centre News*, which Moshe has been editing for many years. For each edition, he collects material about the Holocaust from all over the world, writes it up by hand, then types it on his Yiddish typewriter. He then passes it on to Mr Mokotov, who transfers it to his computer.

Moshe recognises that the transition from a Centre run almost entirely by volunteers to the one that exists today is something that was necessary and he is proud that the Centre has achieved recognition both in the Jewish community and in the wider community. At the same time, he feels strongly that the importance of Yiddish at the Centre must always be remembered. 'We owe it to the millions who perished and whose language it was,' he says.

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We consider the finest memorial to all victims of racist policies to be an educational program which aims to combat antisemitism, racism and prejudice in the community and fosters understanding between people.

Centre News

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