



**JEWISH GHETTO? FOR WHOM AND WHY?**

The discussions on the restitution of the Jewish communal property right in Lithuania have lately crossed over the pages of national press. A good example is the article "One of Lithuania's few Jews fights to rebuild Vilna Ghetto" by Adam B. Ellick, first published in the "Chicago Jewish News" and later in other press and on the Internet, as well as other foreign publications.

The record of A.B.Ellick's interview with E.Zingeris, Chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Heritage Fund, strikes with a number of inaccuracies and statements which distort the essence of the developments taking place in Lithuania.

A lyrical scene at the beginning of the article is already a value in itself: "it's a shivery winter Shabbat evening and Emanuelis Zingeris is immersed in a spiritual moment at Europe's largest synagogue". E.Zingeris is referred to as a rabbi on the website of the jewish.ru. Nobody knows where this "knowledge" inconsistent with the reality comes from. E.Zingeris has never been a rabbi and, regrettably, the Great Synagogue ceased to be a part of Vilnius 50 years ago.

The following statements seem to be invented, too: "in September, Zingeris completed a four-year mission by rebuilding a Yiddish theatre left in ruins after six decades of Nazi and Soviet rule. In August he founded the first World Litvak Congress".

Firstly, the pre-war building of the theatre has never been destroyed. A cinema had functioned in its premises from the end of the War to the restoration of Lithuania's Independence. At the end of the 1990s, it was passed to the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum whose director was, in fact, the same E.Zingeris. The interior of the building was altered by a state order and the site was inaugurated in September 2001 as the state-owned enterprise Tolerance Centre rather than the Jewish Theatre. Secondly, it is not that hard to trace the role of E.Zingeris as that of the "founder" of the First World Litvak Congress. It just takes to have a look at the publication of the Congress: E.Zingeris was neither among the organising nor honorary organising committee, as he had nothing to do with the idea of the Congress, its organising and conducting of its work. It should be recognised, however, that he was diligently present everywhere around and, wearing a serious face within those seven days of the Congress, made efforts to be seen by imitating his frenetic activity.

Later, as A.B.Ellick informed, E.Zingeris undertook the implementation of a new idea: "under Zingeris plan, the state would donate three vacant plots of land to his Jewish fund, which would woo foreign investors - mainly from Israel, America and Germany - to reconstruct buildings to historical specifications. In exchange for lucrative property in the city center, companies would leave some space on upper floors for Jewish communal institutions like a library, museum, and studios for Jewish artists".

"Three vacant plots of land" are the squares in the Old Town of Vilnius, which were formed as a result of destruction of buildings during the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto in 1943 and battles of 1944. According to E.Zingeris' "plan", "the build-

ings" should be restored "to historical specifications". What ghetto are we talking about? Despite the adjective "historical", the very concept of the "ghetto" coincides with humiliation of human dignity and violation of rights in the Jewish consciousness. However, there was no "historical" ghetto in Vilnius. There was only a densely populated Jewish quarter in the

However, unexpected obstacles appeared to carry out E.Zingeris' "plan". Lithuania's Jewish Heritage Fund managed by E.Zingeris was set up in 1995 and re-registered in 1997 and 2000 as a private entity. However, the State has no right to give away land lawfully to private natural and legal persons in other ways but thought a tender. Those who want to use E.Zinge-

a library and the Tolerance Centre.

In fact, the Jewish Community of Lithuania merited to the career of our "sole" hero. Within 12 years our community has grown and the Jewish youth is significant and responsible contributor to a lot of important issues. The youth is the future of the community. The goal of the JCL is to set the precondi-

mental. There was an attempt to confuse the society, give people some image that fails to correspond with the reality, as if E.Zingeris' "plan" was the plan of the community and was necessary for Lithuanian people.

Such an irresponsible position is, first and foremost, suitable to E.Zingeris himself and those who back him: if his "plan" fails, the blame would

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centre of the town.

The Nazi set up a ghetto in Vilnius in summer 1941. The ghetto territory covered not only the Jewish quarter but also a couple of neighbouring quarters which, based on archaeological data, used to be populated by the Catholics and the Jews started establishing themselves there no earlier than the 18th century. Was it the size of the territory that predetermined the appearance of the "Historical Jewish Ghetto" instead of the "historical Jewish quarter"? Now the very idea on restoring the ghetto shocked some and puzzled the others: would it be so that the Nazi ghetto would be really restored? At the moment, an attempt is made to replace the word "ghetto" with the word "quarter" in the project title (although for the sake of accuracy the plural, i.e. "quarters" should be used) and the said "plan". However, titling them "Restoration of the fragments of historical Jewish quarter" did not alter the essence.

In the opinion of E.Zingeris, the new construction is "Yiddish on the outside and commercial on the inside". Thus "Yiddish on the outside" is the prop and decoration: the architecture of the former Jewish quarter did not differ from the architecture of those neighbouring non-Jewish quarters. The essence of E.Zingeris' "plan" is understandable "commercial on the inside": modern hotels, restaurants, cafes, entertainment businesses, etc. to be established in the new premises. According to the reporter, E.Zingeris insisted that the land "be donated to his fund as 'moral restitution'." To be donated to whom? To E.Zingeris himself? On what basis? What does this "moral institution" mean?

Some of the TV channels often show E.Zingeris as the embodiment of the Lithuanian Jewish interest. He stated in some TV show that he did not claim restitution of Jewish property and only asked for the aforesaid plots of land in the Old Town. Who authorised him to make such irresponsible statements? Did he speak in his own name or was he authorised by the JCL?

There is no need to have a particular insight to understand that E.Zingeris' puppet position is handy for those who try to take over the plots of land in the centre of Vilnius under the authority of the Jewish community, realise their commercial interest, and replace the discourse of the restitution of the pre-war property with the "restoration of historical specifications".

ris' Fund as the supplement to the Jewish Community of Lithuania found themselves in a deadlock.

Artūras Zuokas, Mayor of Vilnius, offered E.Zingeris' Fund the way out of the deadlock concerning the land plots. According to the plan of the Mayor, namely the municipality rather than E.Zingeris' Fund should pick the plums. Namely the municipality would undertake the task of announcing the tender and become a contracting authority for the reconstruction of the "historical specifications". The businessmen who would come out as the winners of the tender would complete buildings for commercial use.

The municipality would receive a third of the restored buildings and selflessly (please note, selflessly, as a moral restitution) pass them over to E.Zingeris' fund. Thus, E.Zingeris is too modest in vain: a third of the buildings rather than some offices on the top floors of the buildings, as he modestly mentioned to A.B.Ellick. On 18 July, on behalf of their organisations, A.Zuokas and E.Zingeris signed an agreement on the restoration of fragments of the historical Jewish quarter (most probably "ghetto"! ). That was done without the Jewish community of Lithuania taking part and clearly stating its position on this "plan".

To get the support of the US Jews, E.Zingeris "feeds" foreign reporters with fairy-tales where he appears a sole hero and fighter for the Jewish culture who is hardly understood by his environment. That is where from the quotation from A.B.Ellick's article comes from: "as a lonely bee swarming around with no beehive - and everyone is swatting at him (E.Zingeris - M.Ch.)".

Why "as a lonely bee" and "with no beehive"? Apart from E.Zingeris, there is the Jewish Community of Lithuania. Though being small, it is an actively developing organisation which joins and represents almost four thousand Jews who live in Lithuania.

There are operational communities in the cities; there are Jewish organisations, unions, clubs, societies, lecture rooms, medical centre, and one of the best schools in Lithuania - Sholom Aleichem Jewish Secondary School, which, by the way, E.Zingeris' son attends, religious and Sunday schools, synagogues and religious communities, Jewish library and the Judaica department in the largest library of Lithuania, the Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, the Jewish State Museum with

tions for young people to grow enabling gifted and active youth to establish themselves in Lithuania rather than foreign countries.

In the opinion of the Community, the Old Town should not be restored as the fictional "Jewish ghetto" - Jewish on the outside and commercial on the inside. What has to be restored is the authentic high-level Jewish Yiddish culture and national life - not only "on the outside" but also "on the inside". This marks the essential difference in the position of the Community and that of the advocates of the entertaining-commercial "Jewish ghetto".

What is the loneliness that E.Zingeris, flourishing public official, weeps about to foreign reporters by making irresponsible statements and pretending to be an exhausted fighter for the Jewish culture? That is what E.Zingeris says to journalist A.B.Ellick: "it's not Manhattan. We don't have 250,000 Jews in power here. I'm alone. Graves and history are not political powers".

What he misses is namely: "250,000 Jews" and necessarily "in power".

Our "lonely" E.Zingeris needs no "graves and history", he needs political power. But he had enjoyed it, almost ten years in a row, i.e. up to the year 2000; he sat in the Seimas and the decision on building-up the squares in the centre of Vilnius as "historical specifications" was namely adopted on his initiative.

How come that such a decision was adopted irrespective to the interest of the Jewish community? Is it so unclear that without the JCL taking part any decrees or decisions are unsuccessful in restoring Jewish life in Lithuania? It should be also noted that those who adopt and implement this "project" hardly try to restore Jewish life and culture in Lithuania. They are interested in the construction and operation of the "commercial on the inside" tourist complex named "Jewish Street".

E.Zingeris informed the journalist that he would need 32 million USD for the realisation of the "plan". Where does this figure come from? Who has justified it? Who apart from the pseudo-rabbi E.Zingeris would give guarantees that this money would not be spent in vain?

A.B.Ellick stated that there was no reason why business should care about the Jewish community. Again, E.Zingeris was depicted as the advocate of the Lithuanian Jewish community interest and it was not acci-

rest on the Jewish community known throughout Lithuania and the world rather than Lithuania's Jewish Heritage Fund which hardly has anybody heard about.

The Jewish community did not authorise E.Zingeris' Fund to represent the communal interests; it neither controls the activity of the Fund nor has any information on its work and is not responsible for its activity.

Moreover, E.Zingeris has no right to speak on behalf of the Jewish Community of Lithuania, as he is not a member of this public organisation. On 23 February 1997, he sent an appeal to the Presidium of the 4th Annual General Meeting where he, among other thing, stated that he was not a member of any public organisation. The same meeting decided by the general vote that "from now on E.Zingeris no longer represents the interest of the Lithuanian Jews in any institutions, both national and international".

Thus, on that "shivery winter Shabbat evening" before he was "immersed in a spiritual moment at Europe's largest synagogue" - which was only imaginable - "rabbi" E.Zingeris should recall that he had no moral and legal right to represent the community that he left without trying to restore his membership for the last five years.

The Jewish community requires neither "historical ghetto" nor "Jewish on the outside and the commercial on the inside". The goal of the JCL is to protect Jewish cultural heritage, to protect its "Yiddishkai" spirit, restore Jewish life and culture. Namely that is the work that the community has been carrying out for over 12 years. It is not possible to restore what had been created for centuries. But the results of this work are already seen. They are known to the entire world.

It is not an easy road to take, but it nevertheless, leads to the revival of spiritual, historical, and material values that have been accumulated by the Jewish in Lithuania for seven centuries, creative development and affluence rather than wasting.

Namely that is why the Jewish Community of Lithuania is not able to support the collective and sham construction offered by E.Zingeris' "plan". The Community strives for the real restitution rather than for its imitation, real protection of Jewish heritage and its development rather than commercial exploitation of the tragic history and memory of our nation.

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