



LATVIAN PRESIDENT AND PRIME MINISTER JOIN IN CELEBRATION OF HISTORIC RIGA SYNAGOGUE RENOVATION

The only synagogue in Riga to survive the Holocaust, celebrated the completion of its renovation in an emotional, dignitary-packed ceremony on August 26 in Riga's Old Town. *Peitav-Shul* (the Synagogue on Peitava's Street) was originally built in 1905 and was the only Riga synagogue not destroyed by the Nazis in 1941. Following the Soviet re-occupation of Latvia it remained as one of the few functioning synagogues in Soviet-ruled territory.

In 2007, the Riga Jewish Religious Community was granted financial support by the European Union and the Republic of Latvia for renovation.

President Valdis Zatlers spoke at the ceremony, along with Arkady Suharenko, Chairman of the Riga Jewish Community, David Kagan, Chairman of the Riga Jewish Religious Community, and Rabbi Mordechai Glazman. Also in attendance were Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, Riga Mayor Nils Ušakovs, the Minister of Information and Diaspora of State of Israel, Yuli-Yoel Edelstein, and a large number of Latvian government ministers and other city, state, and community leaders.

One of the emotional high points of the ceremony came when Minister Edelstein revealed that as a young Jewish "refusenik" from Moscow, he had visited the *Peitav-Shul* synagogue in Riga 1983. Upon his return to Moscow he was arrested and imprisoned for his actions. Earlier in the day, Minister Edelstein had met with Foreign Minister Māris Riekstiņš where they discussed the contributions of the Latvian Government to maintain Jewish culture in Latvia, as well as measures accomplished to promote Holocaust education and remembrance in Latvian schools.

In his remarks, Arkady Suharenko stressed that the *Peitav-Shul* synagogue has for many years been the spiritual center of the Jewish community in Latvia. Following its survival after the Holocaust, it "has become a symbol of our community's ability to thrive and develop in Latvia".

In addition to being a religious center for the Jewish community, the synagogue is also officially recognized by the Republic of Latvia as an architectural monument of national significance. It is one of the rare sacral buildings in Riga to be constructed in the Art Nouveau (Jugendstil) style. Its artistic image uses the language of Egyptian architectural forms and creates the impression of a resplendent Eastern-style building.

The *Peitav-Shul* was the only synagogue in Riga to escape destruction by the Nazis because it was located in the Old Town and there was a risk that the fire would spread to nearby buildings. The Nazi destruction of Riga's other synagogues took place on July 4, 1941 and today that is an official day of remembrance in Latvia. During the war the synagogue was used as a warehouse. After the war it was learned that the eastern wall of the synagogue, where the bookcase with Torah scrolls (*Aron Kodesh*) was located, had been concealed. This deed, which saved the Torah scrolls from destruction, is attributed to Gustavs Shaurums, a priest from the nearby reformist church.

Latvia's Jewish community, which numbers around 14,000, traces its roots to survivors of the Holocaust, and to Jews who immigrated to Soviet-occupied Latvia from elsewhere in the Soviet Union following World War II. It is estimated that over 70,000 Jews were killed in Latvia during the Holocaust. The inscription above the *Aron Kodesh* at *Peitav-Shule* was made after World War II

and displays these words from one of David's psalms: "Blessed be the Lord who hath not given us as prey to their teeth".



THE LATVIAN INSTITUTE

The Latvian Institute (Latvijas institūts) was established by the Latvian state to provide a wide range of information about Latvia, its society, culture and history.

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