



Riga: Commemoration and Admonition

Places of Remembrance

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Cover picture:

The Rumbula Memorial Site

 Volksbund

Preliminary remarks

A trip to Riga is something to look forward to. The beautiful city directly on the Baltic coast captivates visitors with its architecture and flair, its art and culture, high-quality restaurants and interesting bars – with a friendly, open-minded population.

However, for many Jews in the German Reich during the National Socialist period, the journey to Riga marked the start of a nightmare, which continued until their death by shooting, torture, disease or starvation.

Riga was one of the central places of deportation for the people of the Jewish faith living in Germany, Austria and the occupied territories of Bohemia and Moravia.

They were deported to the Latvian capital in cattle wagons in inhumane conditions, where those who were not shot immediately on the spot were exploited, tortured and finally murdered. Their Latvian fellow believers had already suffered the same fate.

We are appalled when we stand at the sites that remind us of these acts – but we should visit them and we must reflect on what happened there. We cannot turn back the past, but we can work to ensure that such things are not repeated. Also, we must not forget the victims, but instead preserve their memory.

In the interim, more than 60 towns and cities in Germany, the City of Vienna and the symbolic members Brno, Terezin,



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📷 Volksbund/Uwe Zucchi

*President of the Volksbund Deutsche
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Prague and Riga have joined together to form the Riga Committee, which was founded in 2000 in the presence of Johannes Rau, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany at that time. The aim of the Riga Committee was and still is to keep the memory of the victims alive – the victims who were brought to Riga from German towns and cities, as well as the Latvian Jews who were murdered in order to “make space” for the “Reich Jews” in the Riga ghetto.

In the founding charter, the member states express their desire to make a contemporary historical contribution which connects their own municipality with Riga and to help promote peace in Europe by forging and maintaining close relations. This aim has lost none of its importance, and it is a very positive development that over the last two decades, many other municipalities have joined the 13 founding towns and cities.

The purpose of this brochure is to present some of the memorials and museums that are able to offer visitors an insight into this dark chapter of European history. The idea to create it came from the Riga Committee, which in its over twenty years of existence has made a major contribution towards keeping remembrance alive. The Bikernieki memorial is just as much a testament to this as the regular Committee conferences.

The mass murder of the Jews in Latvia would not have been possible without the occupation of the Baltic country by the Wehrmacht (the German Army). It was only because of the

occupation that the SS and the Einsatzgruppe (mobile killing squad) A were able to implement their programme of destruction of the Jews.

When during the course of 1944 the Soviet Army beat back the Wehrmacht in bloody battles, many German soldiers were killed. They were also victims of the war that Germany had begun, and which had brought them to the Baltic region and elsewhere. More than 6,000 of these fallen soldiers are buried at Beberbiki cemetery near Riga, which was constructed by the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (the German War Graves Commission) in 1999 and which has been maintained by the organisation since then.

It is by no means obvious that the fallen German soldiers should be commemorated in a country to which they brought great misfortune – regardless of the issue of individual guilt, which in many cases is now impossible to adjudge. Such remembrance is only possible in partnership with those whose forefathers suffered under the German occupation and in whose native soil the soldiers are buried.

The maintenance of war graves is therefore unthinkable in countries outside Germany without the active desire for reconciliation, the basic principle of which should however not be to forget what occurred, but to remember – to remember one's own guilt, to remember the suffering of others, and to remember what happens when a democracy descends into dictatorship.

The purpose of this brochure is to promote remembrance, to act as a warning reminder and to contribute towards reconciliation.



An event to commemorate the Jews who were murdered in Bikernieki, 2010

 Volksbund/Uwe Zucchi



Riga, Moscow suburb, the site of the Jewish ghetto in Riga, undated

📷 Volksbund

The fate of the Jews in Riga, 1940 – 1945

Exclusion, persecution, destruction

Riga, the capital of Latvia, which attracts many visitors every year due to its beautiful buildings and landscape, was one of the first sites of the mass murder of Jews from the “Greater German Reich” during the Second World War.

In Riga, it was not only the Jews living in the city who fell victim to the National Socialist terror, but also many people of the Jewish faith who were transported to Riga from the German Reich, Austria and Czechoslovakia.

After the First World War, Latvia attained independence and before the Second World War had a population of around 1.9 million, of whom around 5 percent were of the Jewish faith. When the Soviet Union marched into Latvia in 1940, occupied the country and incorporated it into the Soviet Union after manipulated elections, the Jewish population was also affected.

The chronicler of Jewish history, Margers Vestermanis, writes:

“During the first year of the Soviet occupation in Latvia (1940/41), all representatives of religious Jewish life and all Jewish national politicians were arrested. They were taken to Stalinist camps, where most of them died. Of the 15,000 inhabitants of Latvia who were deported by the Stalin regime on 14 June 1941, around a third were Jews, half of whom came from Riga.”¹

When Latvia was occupied by the German Wehrmacht in July 1941, many Latvians initially regarded them as liberators of their country. However, in reality, their lives did not improve; in fact, the opposite was true. For the Jewish population in particular, the situation became rapidly worse. Einsatzgruppe A of the security police and the security service (“SD”, with the Einsatzkommando 2 for Latvia) advanced directly behind the front



Jewish citizens are not permitted to use the pavement, but must walk along the road, Riga 1942

📷 Federal Archive image-183-N1212-319

line troops. These were mobile units that were formed for the purpose of murdering Jews and alleged communists. Now, the Jews were vilified as being collaborators with the Soviets. Spontaneous, uncoordinated attacks were conducted on the Jewish population, which led to the deaths of several thousand people.

“As the corpses of our Jewish fellow citizens, friends and relatives piled up around us, as the blood of innocent people was spilled in streams, we looked for help to our Latvian fellow citizens, friends and acquaintances, convinced that surely here or there a hand would be lifted to help us, surely a mouth would open to speak to us a word of comfort – but in vain. A bloody frenzy had overcome the country, and those who did not raise their hands to commit murder tried at least to harass us. We were thrown out of the electric street cars and the buses (the official ban on our use of public transportation did not come until two months later); people watched for Jews standing in line in front of shops and tried not to sell them any food.”²



Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto. Taken by an unknown photographer, around 1942

📷 Hamburg State Archive 213-12_0044_Vol 034_0115_Image66

Riga, Moscow suburb, the site of the Jewish ghetto in Riga, undated

📷 Volksbund

However, the German occupiers quickly realised that these pogroms would not suffice if they were to achieve their goal of destroying the Jews, and took on the “task” of systematically annihilating the Latvian Jews themselves. In July 1941, guidelines were issued by the commander of the “Reichskommissariat Ostland”, Hinrich Lohse, regarding the treatment of the Jews. The guidelines went even further than the Nuremberg Race Laws, by also defining non-Jewish spouses of Jews as being Jewish. They were forced to wear the yellow star and were subjected to numerous repressive measures.

The Jews were assigned a specific ghetto area, the “Moscow suburb”, and were forced to join labour units, while being prohibited from continuing to work in normal professions, receiving an education or using public transport. When they were moved to the ghetto, they were made to leave behind everything they owned in their apartments, aside from a small amount of luggage.

In October 1941, over 29,000 people lived within very narrow confines of this ghetto. However, they were not even allowed to continue living this life.

The National Socialist leadership wanted to deport the Jewish citizens living in the German Reich to the east. The plan was to transport 50,000 Jews to Minsk and Riga. However, in Riga, there was no accommodation available – a fact that the commander of Einsatzgruppe (mobile killing squad) A, Walter Stahlecker and the “Höhere SS und Polizeiführer Ostland” (the higher SS and police commander Ostland), Friedrich Jeckeln, declined to report to Berlin. In order to create space in the Jewish ghetto in Riga, they planned a vast murder campaign.

On 30 November 1941, which has gone down in history as the “Riga Bloody Sunday”, and on 8/9 December 1941, about 27,000 Latvian Jews were shot, mainly in the Rumbula forest, but also in Bikernieki.

“Rumbula, which until that day had been only a tiny rail-road station, a point on the map, became during those days a meaningful name in the history of the extermination of the Jews, just as the forest of Bikernieki had been previously and the Kaiserwald concentration camp was to be subsequently.”³

This mass murder was reported by the local SS officers to the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (the Reich Main Security Office) in Berlin, which in its incident report USSR No. 155 portrayed these activities in cynical technocratic language as a “success”:

“The number of Jews remaining in Riga – 29,500 – has been reduced to 2,500 following the campaign by the HSSPF [Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer] Ostland.”

In total, 20 deportation trains with around 28,000 Jewish people reached Riga from the end of November 1941 to early February 1942. The passengers of the first train were on their arrival at Šķīrotava station directly transported to Rumbula and immediately shot there, while the others were housed in the Jewish ghetto that had now been emptied of its inhabitants.

They, too, were not spared annihilation. The Dünamünde campaigns attained a terrible notoriety. With the (false) claim that labourers were needed for relatively light work in the (non-existent) fish factory in Dünamünde (Daugavgrīva, a district of Riga about 15 km from the city center), weaker and older people were lured onto lorries which brought them to Bikernieki. There, they were shot. This marked the start of the mass annihilation of the Jews from the German Reich.

“In the camp, we were told that all women and children from Jungfernhof would be taken away to Dünamünde. Allegedly, there were hospitals, schools and solid stone buildings there where they could live. I asked the commander to send me to Dünamünde as well, but he refused, saying that I was too good a worker.”⁴



“Blood Street” (Ludsa Street) in the Riga ghetto, which leads to Rumbula

📷 Hamburg State Archive 213-12_0044_Vol 034_0123_Image38



¹ Margers Vestermanis, *Juden in Riga. Ein Wegweiser zu den Spuren einer ermordeten Minderheit*, 3rd revised and expanded edition, Bremen 1995, p. 14

² Bernhard Press, *The Murder of the Jews in Latvia*, 2000, p. 50/51

³ Bernhard Press, *The Murder of the Jews in Latvia*, 2000, p. 103/104

⁴ Viktor Marx, who was told that his wife Marga and daughter Ruth had been transported to Dünamünde; in reality, they had been shot in Bikernieki.



Menorah in Rumbula

📷 Volksbund

Rumbula

Mass murder in the pine forest

Rumbula is a district of Riga and the name of the small pine forest there. It is also the site of the biggest murder campaign of the Jews in Latvia. On one single day, on 30 November 1941, over 15,000 Latvian and 1,000 Berlin Jews were shot here. A second murder campaign, which led to the deaths of a further 12,500 Latvian Jews from the ghetto, took place on 8 and 9 December 1941.

In order to create space in the Riga ghetto for the Jews who had been deported there from the German Reich, the inhabitants of the ghetto were murdered. A huge mass murder campaign on this scale required careful planning. This process began immediately after SS Obergruppenführer (SS senior leader) Friedrich Jeckeln was named HSSPF, Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer (higher SS and police commander), for the Baltic region and elsewhere, and established his headquarters in Riga. Jeckeln was an experienced mass murderer, who had already proven his inhumanity in Ukraine (including the Baby Yar massacre).

On 12 November 1941, he received the order in Berlin from SS leader Heinrich Himmler to murder the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto in Riga. This decided the argument within the National Socialist leadership between the “exploiters” who wanted to keep the Jews alive as forced labourers and the “annihilators”.

Following his return to Riga, he began preparations for the mass murder. The forest at Rumbula was considered a suitable location. It was sufficiently close to the city of Riga to enable the Jews to be forced there on foot. The concern here was not for the physical strain on the victims, but for making the most of the daylight hours, which were very short in the Baltic region in November.



A memorial stone in Rumbula

 Volksbund

In preparation for the mass murder, pits were dug in Rumbula, each with a length of 24 metres and a width of around 3 metres, which were designed to hold around 25,000 corpses in total.

The victims who were led to these pits had previously been commanded to undress down to their underwear, or even to remove all their clothing. They were then told to lie down in the pit on their stomach, with their head facing the centre. They were then murdered by being shot in the back of the head. The next “shift” was then required to lie on top of the corpses in the same position, and suffered the same fate. The procedure continued until one pit was full. Friedrich Jeckeln had insisted on this “efficient” murder procedure, which was known as “sardine packing” or the “Jeckeln method”.

Only very few people survived the massacre, including Frida Fridé, a seamstress, who at that time was 35 years old. She later published the book “I Survived Rumbuli” under her married name, Frida Michelson.

Frida Michelson managed to pretend to be dead just before the shooting started. She was soon covered over by a large pile of shoes that the murder victims were required to remove, making her invisible to the perpetrators.

Frida Michelson, described the events in these words:

“The people were crying bitterly, said goodbye to each other, thousands were running towards their death [...]

The guns never stopped shooting, and the soldiers never stopped forcing us to hurry further. ‘Faster! Faster!’, beating the people with rubber batons and whips. This went on for many hours. Finally, the screams and lamentations stopped, the thudding of the steps came to a halt and the guns fell silent. I heard earth being dug close by. Probably they were burying the people who were shot. The workers were given the command to hurry in Russian. Probably Soviet prisoners of war were brought here to do the work. I am sure that they were also shot later.”¹



Memorial stones for the killees

📷 Volksbund



A panel provides information about the crimes committed by the Nazis

📷 Volksbund

Since the first deportation train already reached Riga from Berlin on 30 November 1941, before the ghetto had been completely cleared, the people in this goods train were also shot immediately. The “Reichsführer SS” Heinrich Himmler complained about this incident to the local commander, the “Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer” Friedrich Jeckeln, not because of the 1,053 human lives that were extinguished, but because Jeckeln had ordered the measure without consulting with Berlin first. Jeckeln had already received the general order to commit mass murder when Himmler instructed him to “create space” in the Riga ghetto.

The murders were by no means conducted in secret. The mass killing was meticulously prepared, and therefore of necessity involved quite a large number of people. Not only did a “suitable” site need to be chosen, but technical preparations were also needed. This required planning, and the forced labourers used for the purpose had to be supervised.

The endless train of Jews leaving the ghetto and passing through the city on their way to the forest at Rumbula was also seen by many people. In their radio broadcasts, the British and Soviet radio services also reported on the mass executions.

A former representative in the German Bundestag (German parliament), Winfried Nachtwei, wrote while researching what happened here that the scene was “seething with uniforms”. The commander, Friedrich Jeckeln, clearly wanted to create a large number of accessories to the crime in order to protect himself from accusations later on. This was also the view of the federal state court of Hamburg during a trial in 1973, when it stated that Jeckeln had placed the staff working for the office of the higher SS and police commander under an obligation “to witness the executions as bystanders, in order to spare no-one the knowledge and first-hand experience of what had happened.”

Major General Walter Bruns, who at that time was a colonel stationed near Riga and who was an eyewitness, described the events to several other officers who were interned with him in a British prisoner of war camp. Their conversation was secretly recorded by the British:

“I want to tell you something: it may be that one thing or the other is correct, but it was noticeable that the execution squad that was shooting there that morning, so six submachine gunners for every pit – the pits were 24 m long and around 3 m wide, had to lie down like sardines in a tin, with their heads facing the centre. Above, six submachine gunners, who then shot them in the neck. When I arrived, the pit was already so full that the people who were still alive had to lie down on it, and then they got shot; to avoid wasting too much space, they had to lie down neatly in layers. Before, though, they were robbed of their possessions at a certain station – this was where the forest began, and here, there were the three pits on the Sunday, and there was still a

1½ km queue, which moved forward step by step. People waiting for their deaths. When they got closer, they saw what was going on in there. About here, they had to surrender their jewellery and their suitcases. The high quality items went into a chest, and the rest was thrown into a pile. The clothing was intended to be worn by our suffering people. And then, just a bit further, they had to undress, and 500 m before they reached the forest, they had to remove all their clothing, and were only allowed to keep on a vest or underpants. They were all women and children, about 2 years old. Then these cynical comments! If I had at least seen that these submachine gunners, who had to be replaced every few hours due to overexertion, were doing their job unwillingly! No; they were making dirty comments. ‘Look at that Jewish beauty.’ I can still see it in my mind’s eye. A pretty woman in a fiery-red vest.”

However, Jeckeln failed to benefit from his attempt to absolve himself from blame by creating a large number of accessories to the murders. In 1945, he had returned to the German Reich, but there, he was captured by the Soviets in April 1945 during the encirclement battle at Halbe and later tried before a court. In February 1946, he was sentenced to death and on the same day, was hanged in public on Victory Square in Riga.

The memorial

In 1973, the site in an area of forest on the south-eastern edge of Riga was turned into a memorial. The memorial territory covers an area of 3.3 hectares. A portion of this area is taken up by the six raised earth mass graves. By far the largest part of the site consists of lawn and shrub areas.

In 2000, on the initiative of the City of Riga and with the financial support of the Volksbund, work began on an extensive renovation of the memorial site. The mass graves were put in order



Rumbula forest

📷 Volksbund

in the same way as those at the Riga-Bikernieki memorial site, the paths were restored, the site was cleaned up and a new, central monument was erected.

The memorial site was designed by the same architect who restored the memorial in Bikernieki, Sergejs Rižs. As well as the City of Riga and the Volksbund, the “Jewish Survivors of Latvia New York” organisation contributed funds, as did private sponsors. The renovated memorial site was inaugurated on 30 November 2002.

When you approach the site, the first thing you see is a metal structure representing the power of the National Socialists. The inscription on a memorial stone states that thousands of Jews were forced to walk along this path to their deaths. At the centre of the memorial site is a four metre-high menorah, with a Star of David at its centre. The names of the Jews who were murdered here are engraved in the stones grouped around it. The names of the streets of the ghetto are also shown here. The six mass graves are marked by square concrete border slabs.

How to get to the Rumbula memorial site



Cuibes iela

Distance from city centre: 12 km

GPS: 56.88455545892025, 24.244113532732094



Take the **Maskavas iela** or the **A6/E22** into south-east direction and turn left into the forest at **Cuibes iela links**. After about 100 meters you will see the memorial.

Parking at the entrance.



A journey by taxi with the Bolt taxi company costs approx. 13 euros (December 2020).



Take **bus no. 18 (direction Darzini)** from the city centre bus stop Elizabetes iela or next stop Gogola iela to **Rumbula**. From there, walk back from the direction of travel for about 500 metres. The memorial site is on the right-hand side. The bus leaves every 30 minutes.



Detailed information about exact departure times is available on the Internet (also in English) under Public transport in Riga:

Rīgas satiksme (**rigassatiksme.lv**) and on the **Transport LV App**.



¹ Source: Eugene Holman, The Rumbula massacre: a case study of a Holocaust atrocity, p. 23 Excursus: An eyewitness account of the events of November 30, 1941
<https://de.scribd.com/document/28474279/The-Rumbula-Massacre>



The Bikernieki Memorial Site

📷 Volksbund

Bikernieki

From place of relaxation to mass grave

The forest of Bikernieki could be a beautiful spot to enjoy peace and relaxation, away from the hustle and bustle of the city close by. What makes the place feel uncomfortable is its history, which leaves you breathless, despite the clean air.

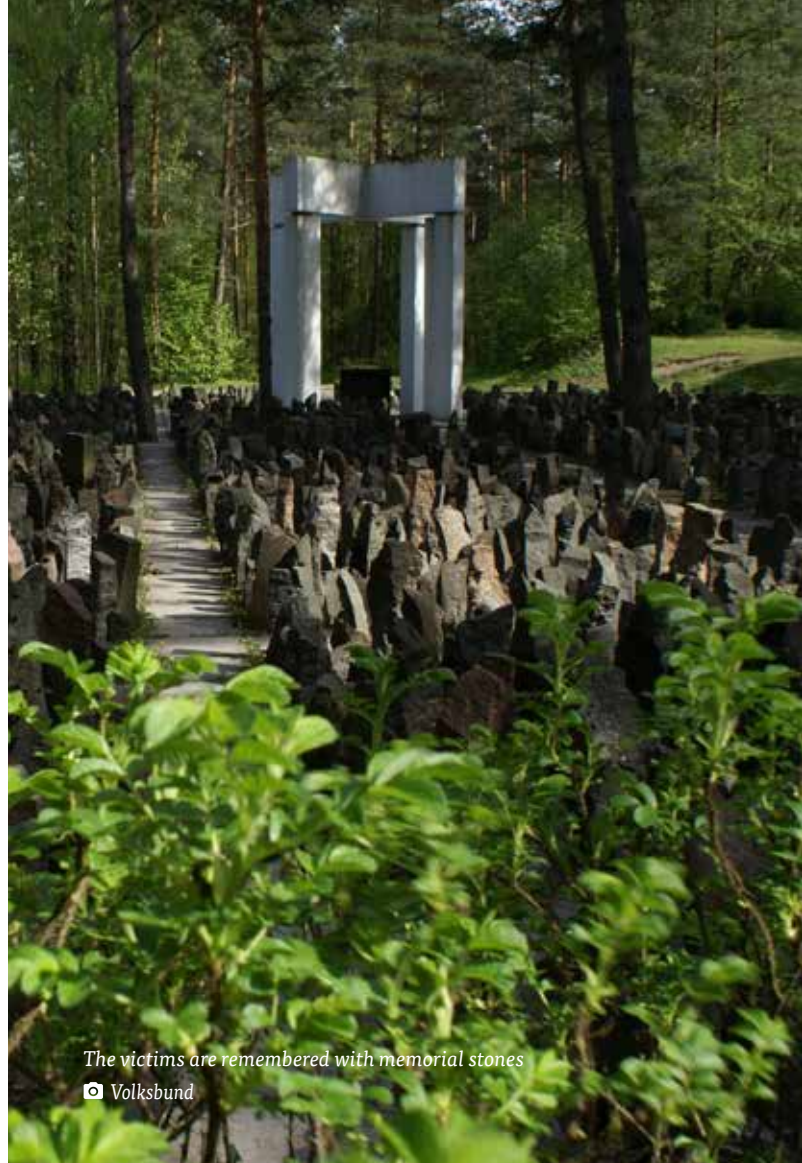
In fact, Bikernieki was already associated with death, murder and suicide early on. In 1919, Latvian Bolsheviks killed 60 people here. Every so often, someone killed either themselves or someone else in this forest.

However, what happened here in 1941 overshadowed what had been before by a long way. In 1941, Bikernieki became the site of the mass murder of Jews. The first victims were several thousand Jews from Riga, who were killed here as part of the “summer executions” campaign. After the murder of most of the inhabitants of the Latvian Jewish ghetto in Rumbula from 30 November onwards, the forest at Bikernieki became the main site of mass shootings in Riga, and later also the site of the murder of countless thousands of Jews from the German Reich.


This was the start of the mass annihilation of the Jews from the German Reich and the territories annexed by Germany, who now also became victims of organised killing campaigns.

Bikernieki is the largest mass murder site in Latvia. Most of the people killed here were Jews, but they were not the only group of victims. People accused of being Soviet activists and communists, prisoners, and nearly 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war were also shot here. The shooting squads consisted of members of Einsatzkommando (mobile killing squad) no. 2, the Waffen-SS, the Latvian ancillary security police and the German police.

The National Socialists were aware of the criminal nature of their murder campaigns. This is why they attempted to cover



The victims are remembered with memorial stones

 Volksbund

over their traces when it appeared likely that they would have to give up power in Latvia. They ordered prisoners to open up the mass graves, exhume the bodies and burn them. In the language of the SS, this was known as “Enterdung”, or “de-earth-ing”. After their physical death, this amounted to a second annihilation of the victims.



The different concrete pillars remind visitors of the different groups of victims

📷 Volksbund

The founder of the Museum of the Jews in Latvia, Mārgers Vestermanis, describes what occurred:

“Since the prisoners were forced to work in chains, and had to sleep chained to trees on site in an open field, they soon lost their strength. They were shot there, and were burned on the piles of corpses that they themselves had created. New groups of gravediggers, who had been sentenced to death, were brought from the Kaiserwald camp. In the prisoner camp, this place of work was known by the special unit as the ‘Stützpunkt’, or ‘base camp’. It soon got itself a bad reputation, since no-one ever returned from there. It is thought that no fewer than 300 Jewish prisoners never returned from this appalling labour at the ‘Stützpunkt’.”

📖 Mārgers Vestermanis (founder of the Museum of the Jews in Latvia), *Juden in Riga. Ein Wegweiser zu den Spuren einer ermordeten Minderheit*, 3rd revised and expanded edition, Bremen 1995, p. 14

For a long time, the victims of the murder campaigns in Bikernieki were not honoured in an appropriate way. During the Soviet era, the Jewish victims of the German occupation were

not a subject of interest in Latvian society. During the winter, people skied over the mass graves.

This only changed when the country regained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The memorial site for the people who were murdered in Bikernieki was inaugurated in 2001 and is maintained by the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge in cooperation with the German Riga Committee.

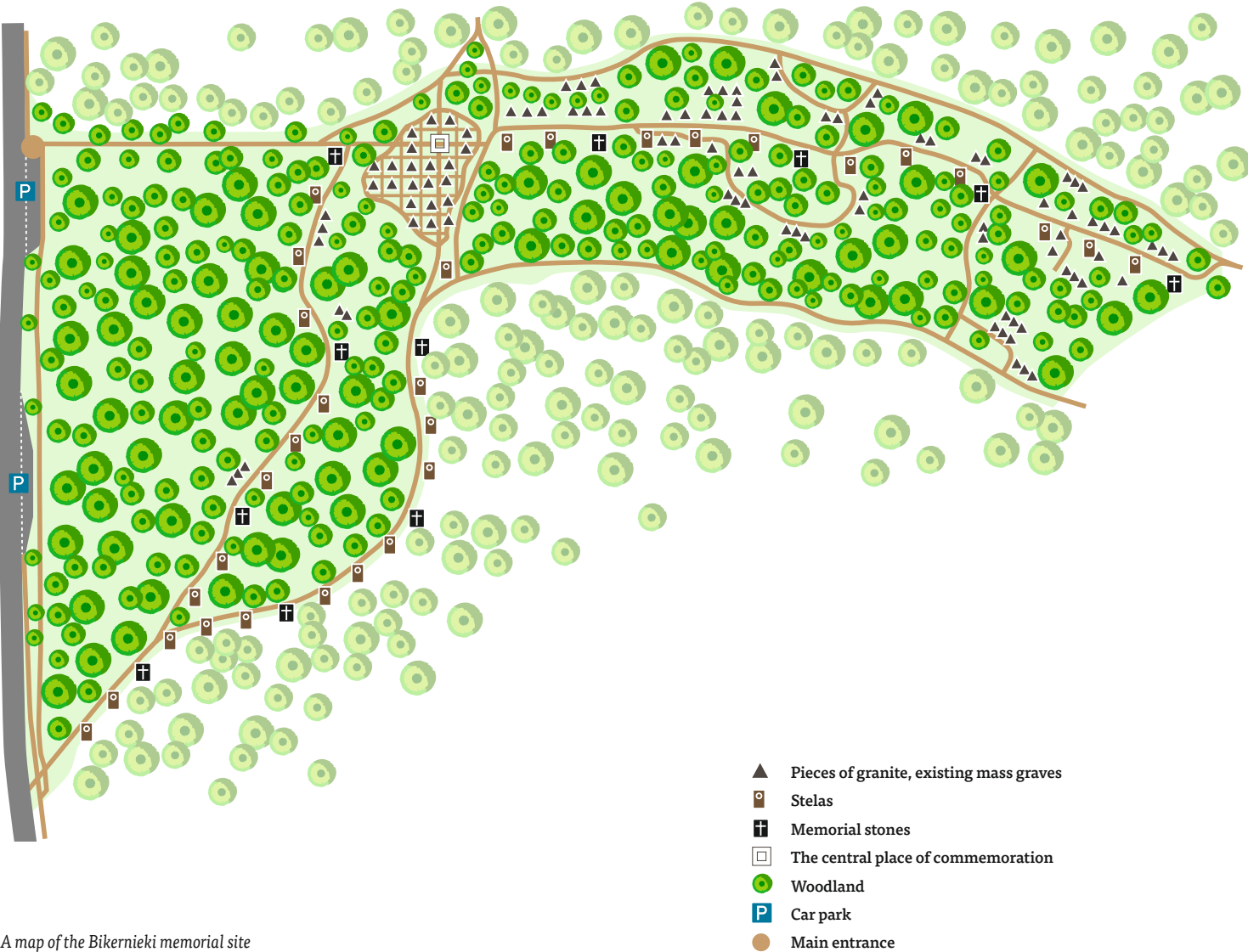
The architect of the memorial site, Sergejs Rižs, who is from Riga, describes it in this way:

“This place of remembrance is divided up into squares, representing the number of mass graves [...] So far, 57 polished granite plates with the names of the towns and cities from where people were brought to Riga have been set in the ground in and alongside the 48 squares. In the centre of this area, where people were driven to their deaths, [...] a symbolic chapel has been erected. [...]”



An altar stone with a verse from the Torah in four languages

📷 Volksbund



A map of the Bikernieki memorial site



A memorial stone with flowers

📷 Volksbund

A memorial name shrine is set in the centre of the chapel. [...]

It contains sealed capsules with lists of names of the victims from the cities from where they came. The sides of the altar are engraved with an inscription from the Tora (Job 16; Verse 18): 'Earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place.'

Concrete pillars have been erected along the forest paths between the graves, which at that time became the path to death for the people brought here. Each pillar is inscribed with one of three symbols, and they stand for the different groups of victims. The symbols are the Star of David, the Christian cross or a crown of thorns for the murdered political prisoners or the Red Army prisoners of war who were already dead when they arrived here, or for other members of the civilian population who could not clearly be assigned to any confession. The concrete pillars have a crown of thorns at the top, as the symbol for the last journey of the victims to their deaths."

How to get to the Bikernieki memorial site



Bikernieku iela 70

Distance from city centre 7 km

GPS: 56.96297, 24.21046



Take the **A2**, then the **Ieriķu iela**, and from there, on to the **Bikernieku iela**.



Parking at the side of the road.



A journey by taxi with the Bolt taxi company costs approx. 9 euros (December 2020).



Bus no. 16 from the city centre, bus stop Terbatas iela, close to Liberty Memorial, (**direction Mucenieki or Papīrfabrik Jugla**) to **Bikernieku memoriāls**, then a 400-metre walk in the direction of travel (towards Papīrfabrika Jugla), journey time: approx. 25 minutes).

The bus leaves every 20 to 30 minutes.



Detailed information about exact departure times is available on the Internet (also in English) under Public transport in Riga:

Rīgas satiksme (**rigassatiksme.lv**) and on the **Transport LV App**.



The Bikernieki memorial site is open at all times.



The museum in Salaspils

📷 Salaspils Memorial/Lilita Vanaga

Salaspils

Police prison and labour education camp

Salaspils, a small town with a population of about 18,000, is located around 20 km to the south-east of Riga. It was known in German as Kurtenhof. This is the site of the memorial of the Salaspils camp, which was erected there in 1941 by the German occupying forces. The memorial site covers around 20 hectares, which is about the size of 14 football fields.

The Salaspils camp was intended as an extended police prison and a labour education camp (for “shirkers”). Construction work began in September 1941. People from the Jewish ghetto in Riga were used as labourers, as well as Jews from the first transport trains from Germany. At first, the forced labourers did not even have a place to shelter. They had to sleep outside in the icy winter weather, and for the first few days, they were not given any food.

“Initially, the camp contained a temporary wooden board construction, the prisoner’s kitchen, alongside a dilapidated, completely overfilled, louse-ridden, sodden barracks building. There, prisoners were given a watery soup containing cabbage, turnip or potato peelings, sometimes fish heads or horse meat, a small amount of coffee in the mornings and, if available, 300 grammes of bread. The lack of food drove many of them to search for edible scraps in the waste from the prisoner’s and SS kitchens. During the Christmas holidays and at the turn of the year in 1941/42, the prisoners received nothing to eat for several days due to transport difficulties. At first, there were no washing facilities. Until the snow melted in the spring of 1942, the prisoners washed themselves with snow or even with coffee.”

📖 Franziska Jahn, Salaspils, in: Wolfgang Benz/Barbara Diestel, *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, Munich 2009, p. 548-558, here: p. 549



The museum in Salaspils

📍 Salaspils Memorial/Jānis Rīņķis

Therefore, the first group of victims in Salaspils in 1941/42 were Jews who were used for the construction work. About 1,000 of them in total died during the construction period.

Originally, Salaspils were designed to house Jews who had been deported from Germany. However, at the same time, it was intended to receive political prisoners and those who refused to work, or “idlers”. Indeed, during the initial phase of the camp, there were hardly any Jewish people there. The Jews who were deported from the Reich were instead housed in the Riga ghetto, where “space had been created” after the people who had lived there were killed in mass shootings. In June 1942, SS-Sturm-bannführer (assault unit leader) and commander of the security police (BdS) Rudolf Lange wrote to the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin: “Of the Jews evacuated from the Reich, 400 are currently still in the camp, and will be used for transportation and excavation work. The other Jews evacuated to Riga have been housed elsewhere.”

In December 1942, there were around 1,800 prisoners in the camp, including just 12 remaining Jews, who were presumably specialists whose skills were still required.

Although Salaspils is often described as a concentration camp, in the formal sense, this was not the case. Otherwise, the secret police would have lost their command of the camp. After its full completion, the camp consisted of 30 barracks, each of which was designed to house 200 prisoners, although at times, they were filled with up to 600 people.

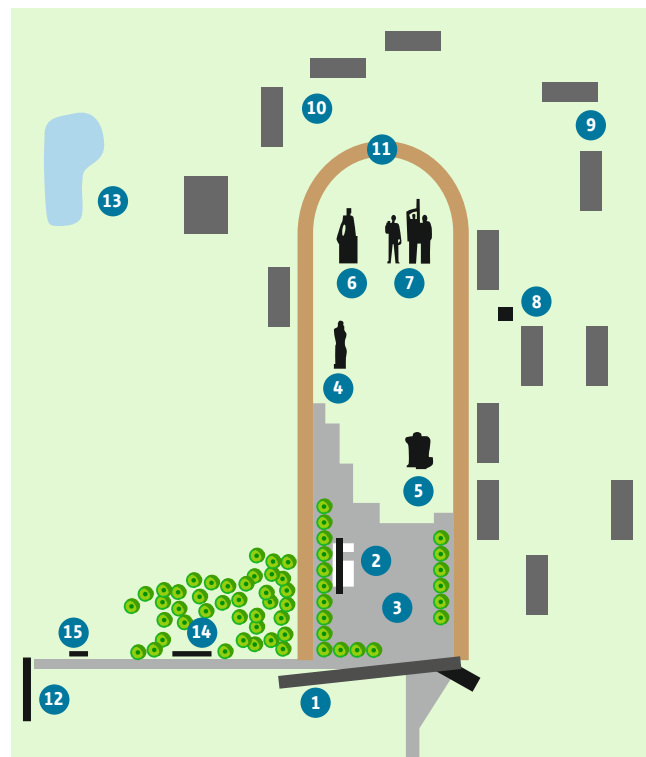
At the start of 1943, the Wehrmacht (the German Army) conducted activities against so-called “gangs”, in other words, insurgents, in the Latvian-Russian border area. The campaign was called “winter magic”.

The historian Andrej Angrick and political scientist Peter Klein describe the procedure as follows:

“Entire areas were plundered of all their goods, villages were burned to the ground, and a few partisans, but mainly the civilian population, were murdered. During the course of these three sub-campaigns, according to a mood and situation report by [SS Sturmbannführer] Lange, at least 3,951 civilians ‘whose participation in the activity of the gangs could not be proven’ were evacuated from the area. 2,228 of these people, including women and children, were taken to Salaspils, where at this point, 1,990 prisoners were incarcerated.”

↗ Andrej Angrick/Peter Klein: Die ‚Endlösung‘ in Riga. Ausbeutung und Vernichtung 1941 – 1944, Darmstadt 2006, p. 254

The Salaspils camp remained in operation until the end of September 1944. As the Red Army advanced closer, the National Socialists dissolved the camp and burned down most of the buildings. The prisoners were taken to various concentration camps, and some were forcibly recruited into the German Wehrmacht as ancillary troops.



A map of the Salaspils Memorial Site

- 1 Life-death wall, memorial museum
- 2 Metronome and site for placing wreaths
- 3 Ceremony site
- 4 Statue “Humiliated”
- 5 Statue “Unbroken”
- 6 Statue “Mother”
- 7 Statues “Solidarity, Oath, Rot Front”
- 8 Memorial stone at the former gallows
- 9 Site of the adults' barracks
- 10 Site of the children's barracks
- 11 Way of Sorrows
- 12 Memorial plaque on the Way of Sorrows
- 13 Pond
- 14 Glass panorama
- 15 Memorial obelisks

During the camp's existence, around 12,000 people were interned there, although according to other academic sources, the number is as high as 23,000. About 2,000 of them did not survive. Together with the approximately 1,000 Jews who died during the construction of the camp, about 3,000 people died in Salaspils, including hundreds of children who died of starvation and maltreatment. Here, too, other data give a different figure of around 1,000 more people who were killed. Approximately 30 people were executed after trying to escape or planning to escape.

The memorial

When you approach the memorial, you immediately notice the stone wall of the museum building, which blocks the view and which bears the inscription (in Latvian): "Behind these walls, the Earth weeps." This is intended to symbolise the transition from life to death. Behind it is the site of the individual places of remembrance. Like the barracks where the prisoners lived, it is set out in a horseshoe shape. In the centre of the memorial site, a metronome beats time in remembrance of the heartbeats of the prisoners, the victims of maltreatment and torture and those who were murdered here.

After the war, the site was initially used as part of a military training facility, before it became a memorial designed in the Soviet style in 1967. The current exhibition and design is from 2017 and examines the history, including the history of the memorial, on the basis of academic research.

You'll find a good overview on the museum website (in English, Russian and Latvian): <https://salaspilsmemorials.lv/en/index/>

Next to the site of the Salaspils memorial complex is the cemetery of the former prisoner of war camp no. 277, where around 150 war dead, who were German prisoners of war, are buried.

How to get to the Salaspils memorial site



Riga raj, Salaspils

Distance from city centre: approx. 18 km

GPS: 56.873, 24.303



From the city centre, take the **A6 (E22)** to the Salaspils memorial. There is a car park at the site. An information panel gives visitors an overview of the site.



A journey by taxi with the Bolt taxi company costs approx. 12 euros (December 2020).



Take **bus no. 18 (direction Darzini)** from the city centre bus stop Elizabetes iela or next stop Gogola iela to **Darzini**. From there it is a walk for about 1,200 metres. The bus leaves every 30 minutes. Alight at **Darzini**.



Trains also travel to Salaspils several times daily. Here, too, alight at **Darzina**. The journey lasts 21 minutes. From there it is a walk for about 2,100 metres.



Detailed information about exact departure times is available on the Internet (also in English) under Public transport in Riga: Rīgas satiksme (**rigassatiksme.lv**) and on the **Transport LV App**.



April to October: daily, 10.00 am – 5.00 pm;
November to March: daily, 10.00 am – 3.00 pm.
Guided tours from 1 March to 31 October, bookings by phone at **+371 67216367**



*The monument to the victims of the concentration camp
was erected in 2005*

📷 M. Striķis, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=53609003>

Kaiserwald (Mežaparks) concentration camp

A forgotten place of horror

“Mežaparks is one of the most beautiful, green and sought-after residential areas in Riga, and is a popular place for relaxation close to the city.” This statement by a tourism bureau is not wrong. You can see houses, a forest and places to spend time and relax here. What you don’t see is the former Kaiserwald concentration camp. A monument is the only sign that this is the place where thousands of people were murdered and even more were tortured.

In 1943, the “Reichsführer-SS”, Heinrich Himmler, ordered that the Jewish ghettos in the Baltic should be liquidated and that their inhabitants, who were in effect already prisoners, should be murdered or taken to concentration camps. All the Jews still living in the ghettos were to be “collected together” in concentration camps and perform forced labour there. Those who were too old were separated out and “evacuated eastwards”, which in reality meant that they were deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

The Kaiserwald (the German name for Mežaparks) concentration camp was founded in the spring of 1943, in connection with the liquidation of the ghetto. It was very small in size, and covered an area of just 150 metres by 225 metres. However, it was the organisational centre of the registration and labour deployment of the Jews from the ghettos in Latvia and also Lithuania – at least for those who had survived the Holocaust up until then.

Four barracks were erected for the prisoners, for men and women. They were built by around 500 prisoners from the Buchenwald concentration camp, who were not Jews, but people who were incarcerated for political or criminal reasons. The people living in the ghetto were brought to the camp from July 1943 onwards. Since the prisoners were to be used as forced labourers, 18 external camps were also created in addition to the con-



A villa in Mežaparks

Smig via Wikipedia



A notice on the fence of Kaiserwald concentration camp, taken by the Red Army following liberation, 1944/1945

Hamburg State Archive 213-12_0044_Vol 034_0021_Image597

centration camp itself. They are thought to have contained between 2,000 and 3,000 male and female prisoners.

The Kaiserwald concentration camp was not an extermination camp, such as Auschwitz, but selections were regularly made, in which all those who were too young, too old or too weak to work were victims.

The majority of the Jews who were interned in the Kaiserwald concentration camp came from the Baltic region, Poland and Hungary. They were exposed to continuous maltreatment, in which the perpetrators were not just SS guards, but also so-called “functionary prisoners”. These were prisoners who were granted privileges in exchange for monitoring their fellow prisoners. Most of the prisoners chosen for this role were criminal prisoners.

“Since they [the other prisoners] were powerless against the daily attacks, they tried to avoid contact with the SS, and particularly with the camp guards, who were quick to use violence, to get out of their way as much as possible when they saw them, to avoid eye contact and to behave in as inconspicuous a way as they could. Of necessity, turning a blind eye when other prisoners were maltreated or if an injustice was done to someone became a tried and trusted principle, and self-preservation became the most important maxim.”

☞ Franziska Jahn, Riga-Kaiserwald, in: Wolfgang Benz/Barbara Diestel (ed.), Der Ort des Terrors, Vol. 8, Munich 2008, p. 17-87, here: p. 39

In May 1944, there were nearly 12,000 prisoners in the Kaiserwald concentration camp and its external camps, almost all of whom were Jewish.

When the Soviet Army advanced towards the Baltic countries, the Kaiserwald camp was disbanded. The prisoners were either murdered or deported to other concentration camps, mainly

the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig. Four transport trains alone departed to Stutthof via the Baltic Sea on 6 August 1944.

The only testament to the events that occurred on this site is the monument to the victims of the concentration camp, which was erected in 2005.

How to get to Mežaparks



Meža prospekts 11

Distance from city centre: approx. 8 km

GPS: 56.99627,24.13235



Take the **Eksporta iela** until you reach Mežaparks.



A journey by taxi with the Bolt taxi company costs approx. 9 euros (December 2020).



Buses Lines 2, 11 oder **24** from **Merkela iela** to **Meža prospekts**. Opposite the street there is the memorial.




Detailed information about exact departure times is available on the Internet (also in English) under Public transport in Riga: Rīgas satiksme (**rigassatiksm.lv**) and on the **Transport LV App**.

More information:

<http://memorialplaces.lu.lv/memorial-places/riga-and-riga-district/riga-kaiserwald-mezaparks/>



The ruins of Gut Jungfernhof

 Dukurs, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The Gut Jungfernhof camp

There's not much left to see of the former Jungfernhof camp. What you see does not reflect the history of this place. Only an information panel provides a brief overview of what happened here. It is located in a small nature area near the city that was created on the site of the former camp.

The former Gut Jungfernhof estate (in Latvian: Jumpravmuiža) is 1.5 km to the south of the Šķīrotava railway station, about 10 km to the south-east of the centre of Riga. It belonged to the Katlakans district on the eastern bank of the Daugava river. In the early years of the 20th century, Gut Jungfernhof was an agricultural estate, or more exactly, a state-owned estate with a manor house and stables. The estate was taken over by the Sovi-

ets when they occupied Latvia. They wanted to build a military airfield there, but construction work never got beyond laying a runway.

After the German Wehrmacht occupied Latvia, the (German) security police took over the site and wanted to turn it into an SS farm. The conditions were unfavourable for the project, since most of the buildings were in an extremely dilapidated state. The deportation to Riga of the Jews living in the German Reich then determined how the farm would be used for the foreseeable future. Since the accommodation in the Riga ghetto for the “Reich Jews” was not yet available, the occupants of a total of four trains from Stuttgart, Hamburg, Nuremberg and Vienna were housed on the farm, even though the living conditions there were by no means adequate.

“There were no doors and no stove, the windows were open and the roof was damaged. It was 45 degrees below zero and the snow blew through the barn.”

✍ Herbert Mai, one of the survivors of the camp from Nuremberg.

While the occupants were ordered to build the camp, some of them were removed and sent to Salaspils to construct the camp there. According to estimates, 800 to 900 of the occupants died in the winter of 1941/42 alone due to the poor accommodation and food. Due to a lack of medication and provisions, the sick were simply shot. The farm was not a camp in the organisational sense, and was not entirely fenced in. Rather, the occupants were guarded by members of the Latvian police, who shot anyone whom they assumed wanted to escape.

In January 1942, 200 women were transferred to the Riga ghetto, and 1,700 to 1,800 prisoners were shot in Bikernieki as part of the “Dünamünde campaign”. With the camp now only housing around 450 occupants, work began on establishing a farm, which soon yielded a good harvest. As a result, the food

situation improved. However, more labourers were taken from Gut Jungfernhof, and in August 1943, only around 80 prisoners remained. It is not clear where they were taken when the camp was dissolved in 1944.

The head of the Gut Jungfernhof camp was SS Unteroffizier (NCO) Rudolf Seck, who came from a farming family. In the camp, Seck exerted absolute rule, and was known for his extreme cruelty towards the prisoners. After the war, following several cases before the federal state court of Hamburg in 1951, Seck was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment, although he was released in 1964, ten years before his death.

The site



Latgal Suburb

The camp was situated on what is today **Maz-jumpravas muizas parks**.

The promenade of Kengarags runs past it.

GPS: 56.891959, 24.199512



Take **Krasta iela** and **A6**. The journey time is about 20 minutes.



There is a new bicycle path from the city centre.



A journey by taxi with the Bolt taxi company costs approx. 9 euros (December 2020).



By public transport: see the directions for travel for Rumbula.



From the **Rumbula monument**, it is a 1,000 m walk to the former farm site.



Škirotava railway station, 2010

CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://lv.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=160067>

Škirotava

Škirotava is a district of Riga that attained a sad notoriety through its train station. Today, the station is one of the most important railway junction in the Riga region, for both passenger and freight transport.

There are no visible signs at the renovated station to remind us of its history during the German occupation.

The freight depot was the start and end point of countless deportations. Even before Latvia was fully occupied by the Soviets on 17 June 1940, an initial transportation of 15,000 politically undesirable Latvian citizens left here for the Soviet gulags. On 25 March 1949, there was a further deportation of over 42,000 people. Of those who were deported, only 2,000 returned to Latvia. A commemorative stone, information panels and a sign on the station building serve as a reminder of what happened here.

Šķirotava illustrates the changing and sad history of Latvia, which became a victim of two dictatorships during the 20th century.

Half a year after the first deportation train left for the Soviet Union – after the Germans had occupied Latvia – Šķirotava became the destination station for the transportation of Jews to Latvia. After arriving in Riga from the German Reich – including Austria, Bohemia and Moravia – they were to be accommodated in the Jewish ghetto and used for forced labour. The Latvian Jews living in the ghetto were annihilated in two mass murder campaigns in order to “create space”. However, when the first deportation train arrived in Šķirotava on 30 November 1941, the ghetto had not yet been fully cleared. The 1,000 Jews from Berlin were therefore taken directly to Rumbula from the station, where they were shot. For all transports, the elderly and the sick were immediately murdered at the station and hastily buried in three mass graves, over which the National Socialists built a railway track. The track still exists today.

There is nothing in Šķirotava to remind us of the Jews who were deported. The only signs of remembrance point to the fate of the Latvians who were deported to the Soviet Union.

How to reach Šķirotava train station



Lokomotīves iela 71

Distance from the city centre: about 10 km

GPS: 56.9043319472042, 24.21133760960843



From the city centre about 10 km in the south-east direction: **Krasta iela, Maskavas iela**, then turn left into **Iksiles iela**, straight ahead to the station. The ride takes about 20 minutes.



A taxi journey with the Bolt taxi company costs around 8 euros from the city centre.



Take **bus no. 18 (direction Darzini)** from the city centre bus stop Elizabetes iela or next stop Gogola iela to **Šķirotava**. The bus leaves every 30 minutes.



From **Riga central station** (Stacijas laukums 2) towards **Ogre/Lielvārde/Aizkraukle**, four stops until you reach **Šķirotava**. The journey time is 15 minutes.



Detailed information about exact departure times is available on the Internet (also in English) under Public transport in Riga: Rīgas satiksme (**rigassatiksme.lv**) and on the **Transport LV App**.



Uncovered parts of the synagogue in Gogol Street, 2010

📷 Volksbund/Uwe Zucht

Gogol Street synagogue

In Riga, the 4th of July is a day of commemoration. It is the day on which the victims of the Shoah, the annihilation of the Jews in Latvia, are remembered. This day in the calendar was selected from the

continuous horrors inflicted as a result of the German occupation and annihilation policy due to events that occurred in the Great Synagogue in Gogol Street.

The Jewish place of worship was not only called the Great Synagogue by name (in Yiddish: Die Greisse Chor Schul – the Great Choral Synagogue), but was also the largest synagogue in Riga. The term “Choral Synagogue” was almost exclusively used in the Russian Empire as a name for a synagogue with a choir.

The building, which had been planned and re-planned since 1868, was inaugurated in 1871 and was one of the most well-known cultural buildings in Riga. The synagogue also had its cantors to thank for this fame. On high holidays, non-Jews also came to the synagogue to listen to the cantor and the choir.

On 4 July 1941, immediately after the German occupation, Latvian ancillary troops murdered about 300 people in this synagogue, who had arrived from other parts of the Baltic region to seek refuge in the cellar there. Previously, other Jews from the surrounding area, as well as those who happened to be outside on the street, had been taken to the synagogue.

Margers Vestermanis describes what happened:

“The murderers drove the people who had been seized into the synagogue, stacked the prayer stools one on top of the other, threw rags soaked in petrol into the corners and set them alight. The doors were closed and nailed up with boards.”¹

The other synagogues in the city were also burned down on that day. The fire brigade arrived at the scenes of the fires, but was concerned only with ensuring that the fire did not spread out to neighbouring buildings. In the narrow streets of the old city, this could not be guaranteed. For this reason, the Peitav Schul was the only synagogue not to be burned down.

For the German occupiers, these brutal attacks were not unwelcome. On the contrary: the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin had ordered the occupiers to encourage and initiate “pogroms” in the occupied territories. They found willing participants in



Parts of the wall of the synagogue in Gogol Street

📷 Volksbund/Uwe Zucchi



Remembrance of the pogroms against the Jews

📷 Volksbund/Uwe Zucchi

the form of Latvian self-protection units, militant anti-Semitic and anti-communist supporters of the Latvian fascist “Donnerkreuz” party. The 31-year-old ex-police officer and law student, Viktor Arajs, immediately put together a unit made up of nationalists, students and pupils, which particularly distinguished itself with its acts of violence against the Jews. It was his unit that was responsible for the pogrom in the Great Synagogue.

The monument

After the war ended, there was nothing here that reminded people of what happened. The ruins were pulled down, the cellar with the remains of the victims was filled in and a green area was created on the site. An honorary plaque dedicated to the “Heroes of work” was also erected, without any reference to this place and the events that occurred here.

It was not until 1988, 47 years after the massacre, that this honorary plaque was removed and replaced by a commemorative

stone with the Star of David. In 1993, a monument was erected here that symbolises the walls of the synagogue. Ornaments have been incorporated which were found during the excavation works. The architect of the monument is Sergejs Rižs, who also designed the memorials in Bikernieki and Rumbula.

Not far from the memorial, you’ll find a monument to Žanis Lipke and all the other citizens who saved people from death during the persecution of the Jews.

The monument is a wall that is 12 m long and 6 m high, which looks as though it is about to topple and crush the Jewish people. The wall is held up by pillars bearing the names of the people who saved Jewish lives, including Žanis Lipke. An inscription on the left-hand side quotes the Book of Yesaya, 56,5: “I will give them an everlasting name that will endure for ever.”

The monument was designed by Elīna Lazdiņa, who was a student at the Latvian Academy of Arts at the time.



¹ Mārgers Vestermanis, *Juden in Riga. Ein Wegweiser zu den Spuren einer ermordeten Minderheit*, 3rd revised and expanded edition, Bremen 1995, p. 22

How to get to the monument



Gogola iela (Gogolastr.) 25



Gogol street (Gogola iela) is about 2 km south-east of the Riga city hall.



Museum of the Jews in Latvia

Sometimes, you come across museum buildings that have a story to tell all by themselves. And there are founders of museums of whom the same is also true. Both of these apply in the case of the Museum of the Jews in Latvia.

The museum is located in the historic building of the Jewish community of Riga. Built before the First World War, it housed the Jewish Club and the Jewish Theatre, as well as the offices of various organisations and a library. To a certain extent, this building was the heart of Jewish life in Riga. When the German Wehrmacht (the German Army) conquered Latvia, and therefore also Riga, they set up an officer's casino in this building. In rooms that used to buzz with Jewish life, officers now rapped out their requests to the orderlies.

After the Second World War and the forced annexation of Latvia to the Soviet Union, the building was converted into a house

Museum of the Jews in Latvia, 2014

📷 [JewsInLatvia, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32353650](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32353650)

of political education and was used to disseminate Soviet propaganda in seminars and conferences. It was not until the early 1990s, after Latvia had regained independence, that the building was returned to the Jewish community.

Today, the Jewish community in Latvia has around 8,000 members. The centre of Jewish religious life is the Peitav-Shul synagogue, which was built in the Art Nouveau style at the start of the 20th century in the old part of Riga. Due to its location and the close proximity to the adjacent buildings in the old town, the Peitav synagogue was the only Jewish building to survive the pogroms and attacks of 4 July 1941. During the Soviet occupation, the synagogue was one of the few Jewish institutions to remain in operation and to retain its importance for the Jewish community. In 1995 and 1998, the synagogue was badly damaged following bomb attacks, but was restored using EU funds and money from the Latvian government, with the work completed in 2009. Today, there are two active synagogues in Riga, with other active Jewish communities in Daugavpils, Rezekne, Ludza and Liepaja.

The Museum of the Jews in Latvia had been founded in 1989. The idea for the museum was made reality by Mārgers Vestermanis, together with several colleagues. Vestermanis was born in 1925 and came from a middle-class Jewish family, where German was spoken. In 1941, after the Germans entered Latvia, he was forced to move to the Riga ghetto. From there, he was taken to Kaiserwald concentration camp, where he was part of a forced labour unit on an adjacent SS military training area. When the prisoners were taken from the camp on the death marches, he succeeded in escaping. He adopted a pseudonym

and joined the resistance. After the war ended, he studied history and then worked in the Latvian state archives, before being removed from his post in 1965 for political reasons. The reason was that Vestermanis had written an article questioning the narrative that Jews had been persecuted and killed because they were Soviet citizens, and not because they belonged to the Jewish community. Vestermanis then worked as a teacher, but he also continued his research on the history of the Jews in Latvia. This resulted in the creation of the Museum of the Jews in Latvia.

During the first few years of its existence, the museum served merely as a documentation centre. It was not until 1996 that it opened its first exhibition to the public. Today, it presents the history of the Jews from the 16th century until 1945. The exhibition is divided into three (themed) rooms: the life of the Jews in Latvia until 1918, Jews in the period from 1918 to 1941, and then the life (and death) of the Jews during the National Socialist occupation from 1941 to 1945.

The museum is accredited by the Latvian Ministry of Culture.

Life in the (small) Jewish community in Latvia today is not shown. The aim of the museum is rather to document the rich history of the Latvian Jews, their contribution to the development of Latvia, and the immeasurable suffering that they endured.

“The museum cannot replace books, since it is impossible to tell the whole story through exhibits. The strength of the museum lies in the indisputable authenticity of the original historical items, which reflect the era shown without tentativeness or embroidery. In precisely this way, we aim to present history to anyone who wants to find out the truth about us, our past and our tragedy. Then, the blessing with which Jews have said farewell to their dead since time immemorial, ‘Let his (or her) soul be bound up with the bond of eternal life’ can really come true.”¹

The museum has permanent ownership of 16,000 exhibits, with the main collection consisting of around 5,000 original items, with documents, photographs, books and other objects of cultural and historical interest. The museum is dedicated to the upkeep of the Jewish legacy, keeping the memory of historical events during the Second World War alive, and increasing the level of popular acceptance and support for the Jewish community in Latvia. It cooperates extensively with various scientific and academic institutions, both within Latvia and abroad, and organises exhibitions that attract international attention.



¹ The founder of the Museum of the Jews in Latvia, Mārgers Vestermanis in: Shalom. The European Jewish Magazine, autumn 2000, online: <http://www.shalom-magazine.com/Article.php?id=340214>

How to get to the museum



The Museum of the Jews in Latvia is on the **second floor** of the **Jewish community building in Skolas iela 6** in the centre of Riga.



Sunday to Thursday, 11.00 am – 5.00 pm, closed on Friday and Saturday.



Entry is free, donations welcome.



Outdoor exhibition in the museum courtyard, 2017

📷 Christian Wendling

Museum of the Riga Ghetto and the Holocaust in Latvia

The Museum of the Riga Ghetto is located near the area of the former ghetto, which has largely been destroyed.

The Riga ghetto was a place of humiliation and suffering for the Jews of Latvia and the “Reich Jews” – people of the Jewish faith who were brought to Riga from the German Reich, and who were then murdered here. The purpose of establishing the ghetto was, in the words of the Reichskommissar (Reich Commissioner) for the occupied eastern territories, Hinrich Lohse, to exclude the Jewish from society, to dispossess them and to exploit them as labourers.

The Jewish ghetto was created after the Germans entered Latvia in August 1941. Approximately 27,000 Jews were forced to leave their homes in the city (and to leave their possessions behind) and move to the ghetto district in the “Moscow suburb” of Riga, which until then had been home to 12,000 people.

From a report by Frida Michelson, who lived in the ghetto:

“Here, the living conditions are far worse than in other parts of Riga. Many houses have neither running water, nor are they connected to the sewage and electricity networks, let alone gas or central heating. The small wooden houses are old, with low ceilings, and many of them are in a very bad condition. [...]”

It has been announced that no more than four square metres have been allocated to each person living in the ghetto. Thirty thousand people have to be accommodated in the buildings of just a few blocks of houses.”¹

In the ghetto, the inhabitants were locked in, and were only permitted to leave for work purposes. Occasionally, people tried to escape. Some of them succeeded, but many failed.

Living conditions in the ghetto were extremely difficult. However, for the people living there, worse was yet to come. In November 1941, the ghetto was cleared to “create space” for the Jews (known as the “Reich Jews”) who were deported from Germany. Early in the morning, people were fetched from their houses and told to form marching columns. The destination of the approximately 11 km-long march was the forest of Rumbula, where they were shot. Anyone unable to continue walking, or who attempted to flee, was shot on the spot. The “small ghetto”, which was home to a few thousand Jews who were still able to work, continued to exist for two more years.

The Jews deported from the German Reich were housed in the apartments of the murdered ghetto residents. In November



The Riga Ghetto Museum, 2014

Robert B. Fishman

1943, the ghetto was cleared for a second time by the German occupiers. One horrific turning point was the “children’s campaign” on 2 November 1943. While the labour units were working outside the ghetto, the SS took over 2,000 children, sick residents and relatives to Šķirotava. There, they were put on trains to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. The remaining residents, the “Reich Jews”, were either murdered or taken to Salaspils camp, or they were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp in Poland.

The first commander of the ghetto was Kurt Krause, who was followed after 1943 by the “butcher of Riga”, Eduard Roschmann. Roschmann was never called to account for his actions. After the war, he succeeded in evading capture, travelling first to several locations in Argentina, and finally reaching Paraguay, where he was even able to set up a business under the name “Federico Wegener”.

The history of the Riga ghetto is complex, interesting and upsetting. It is also worth taking a look around the site of the ghetto itself and obtaining expert information. The former representative in the German Bundestag (German parliament), Winfried Nachtwei, has taken an intense interest in the memorial sites in Riga and the ghetto there. His website (www.nachtwei.de) contains a great deal of information.

The museum

The museum, which tells the story of the ghetto, was opened in 2010. This is not a historical place in itself, but a museum close to the historical site. The issue of whether such a reconstruction is permissible, and if so, to what extent, has been the subject of intense discussion in Latvia.

The plot of land on which the museum stands is covered with paving stones from the ghetto. There is a commemorative wall on which the names of over 70,000 Latvian Jews and 25,000 Jews deported to Riga are listed. A section of the commemorative wall shows numerous contemporary photographs from the ghetto, as well as street maps as an orientation guide. A piece of the ghetto fence reminds visitors that the entire ghetto was fenced in, and that the residents were not able to leave without permission. The approximately 500 citizens who risked their lives to help and save Jews during the National Socialist occupation are also remembered here.

A large part of the exhibition is located outdoors. The museum itself contains two permanent exhibitions, which not only present the suffering of the Jews during the first half of the 20th century, but also Jewish life, tradition and the Jewish religion. Overall, 21 of the originally 210 Latvian synagogues are recreated using different materials, including the Great Choral Synagogue, shown on a scale of 1:50, which was destroyed in a pogrom in 1941.

In this way, the exhibition is not only dominated by the horrors experienced by the Jews in Riga. The museum is run by the religious Shamir Association, which established it in cooperation with the Riga city administration in 2010. In 2020, the City of Riga enabled the museum to continue to stay open by allowing it to use the site rent-free.



¹ Frida Michelson, I Survived Rumbuli, published by United States Holocaust (January 1, 1982).

How to get to the museum



The official address is **Maskavas iela 14 a**, but the entrance is located on **Krasta iela**.



You can reach the museum by foot from the city centre.



Lines 2, 5, 10 from **Grēcinieku iela** or tram **lines 7 and 9** from **Nacionālais teātris** to **Turģņeva iela** and on foot from there.



Daily except Saturday, 10.00 am – 6.00 pm.



Entry is free, donations welcome.



Žanis Lipke memorial

There are also silent heroes in Latvia who put their lives at risk to protect others. Žanis Lipke was one of these.

He originally worked as a docker at the port in Riga, but later as a warehouse worker for the Luftwaffe (the German air force), where he used his position to smuggle Jews from the ghetto and hide them in a bunker or barn next to his house until the German occupation came to an end. In this way, he saved them from certain death. He managed to save 50 people in this way, in cooperation with his wife Johana and other helpers. This amounts to a quarter of the 200 or so Jews who succeeded in surviving the Holocaust.



Inside the Žanis Lipke Museum

📷 Muzejs „Žaņa Lipkes memoriāls“/Ansis Starks

In 2012, a memorial was opened right next to the place where he used to live on the Daugava island of Ķīpsala. Here, visitors are given an insight into the life of the Lipke family and the ways in which they saved the Jews. The lower floors are closed to the public, but you can take a look in from the outside. They show a three-dimensional rendition of the caves in which the people were forced to hold out for long periods of time. The house also hosts events that not only serve to keep the memory of the Lipke family alive, but which also aim to promote tolerance and a peaceful coexistence.

How to get to the museum



The museum is situated on **Mazais Balasta dambis 9**, a small cul-de-sac that is not even shown on all maps of the city. Perhaps that's the reason why Lipke was never discovered – and why he was able to escape death himself.



If driving by car, park on **Balasta Dambis** and walk the few steps to the Lipke Museum, since there are no parking facilities there.



Lines 37, 41 or 53 from the city centre to **Kathedrale/Esplanade**



The museum is open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 12.00 midday to 6.00 pm, on Thursdays from 12.00 midday to 8.00 pm, and on Saturdays from 12.00 midday to 4.00 pm.

Don't be put off if a door is closed; simply ring the bell.



Exhibition in the Occupation Museum

📷 Latvian Occupation Museum

also meant that many people left the country – a topic that is covered in the fourth section of the exhibition. The fifth section presents the restoration of independence and the events that caused this to happen.

Currently (as of December 2020), the museum building in the city centre is being renovated and expanded. It is being temporarily housed in the US Embassy building. In another building, there is an exhibition about the KGB, the Soviet secret service.

The Latvian Occupation Museum

The name of the museum already indicates the main focus of the exhibition in this building. According to the basic theory, Latvia was occupied three times during the 20th century: once by Nazi Germany, and twice by the Soviet Union, which incorporated Latvia into the state. Latvia was not able to regain independence until 1990, when it used its new independent status to join the European Union and NATO in the following years.

All the occupations are presented in detail in the museum. The exhibition starts with the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union in 1940 as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 24 August 1939. The second section deals with the occupation of Latvia by the Germans and the annihilation of the Jews during this period. In the third section, the period of enforced membership of the country of the Soviet Union is documented. This

How to get to the museum



Raiņa bulvāris 7 (permanent exhibition) and **Brīvības iela 61** (KGB exhibition).

Both buildings are in the city centre.



Tuesday to Saturday, 11.00 am to 3.00 pm.




Entry is free, donations welcome.

Other memorial sites and museums in connection with this topic

The Latvian War Museum in the old powder tower

The museum documents the complex military and political history of Latvia, with a focus on the 20th century.

 **20, Smilšu iela** (Pulvertornis)

 Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10.00 am – 6.00 pm, during the winter (October to March) from 10.00 am – 5.00 pm
Entry is free.

 www.karamuzejs.lv

The People's Front Museum

Although the People's Front Museum is housed in a 17th century building in the city centre, it documents Latvia's most recent history, when the country defended itself against Soviet domination and regained its independence.

 **Vecpilsētas 13/15**


 Open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10.00 am – 5.00 pm.
Entry is free.

 liveriga.com/en/1555-popular-front-museum

The 1991 Barricades Museum

The museum is also in the heart of the old city. It documents the barricades that were built and defended in connection with the battle for the restoration of independence.


 **Krāmu iela 3**

 Open Monday to Friday, 10.00 am – 5.00 pm,
Saturdays from 11.00 am – 5.00 pm

 www.barikades.lv


Monument to the suppressed

Several monuments at the Torņakals train station are a reminder of the deportation of the Latvians to the Russian gulags during the first and second occupation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union, particularly during the Stalin era.

 The train station is the first stop to the south of the main station and the Daugava when travelling out of the city.

Soviet victory monument

The monumental memorial, which was erected in 1985, celebrates the victory of the Soviet Union over National Socialist Germany.

 It is located in the Uzvaras Park (Peace Park) on the left bank of the Daugava and is difficult to miss. The 79 metre-high victory column is surrounded by a group of sculptures.



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