



THE RIGA COMMITTEE

AN ALLIANCE OF CITIES
FOR THE REMEMBRANCE
OF THE DEPORTATIONS OF JEWS

Imprint

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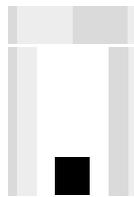
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RIGA-KOMITEE

STÄDTEBÜNDNIS
FÜR DAS ERINNERN UND GEDENKEN
AN DIE DEPORTATION VON JÜDINNEN UND JUDEN

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FOREWORDT

BY THE FEDERAL PRESIDENT

FRANK-WALTER STEINMEIER



Bikernieki – it is likely that only very few Germans are familiar with this place or have ever heard of it. But anyone from Germany who makes their way to the Bikernieki forest will discover the names of many German cities, engraved in black granite: Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Hanover and Hamburg. These were the home cities of German Jews. In these cities, they were forced to board trains that took them away from their homes. The sprawling network of the Deutsche Reichsbahn led them here, via Riga to Bikernieki, to their deaths.

People living in German cities who want to find out more about the history of this place in Latvia can start on their own doorstep. In Berlin, for example, poet, children's author and widow of the scholar of German studies and theatre critic Arthur Eloesser, Margarete Eloesser, boarded a train in January 1942 that she hoped was going to take her to Theresienstadt. The Berlin authorities listed her final worldly possessions as 90 books, five handkerchiefs and two towels.

Margarete Eloesser was mistaken. Her life ended in the Bikernieki forest. After the occupation of Latvia by the Wehrmacht on 1 July 1941, German and Latvian perpetrators shot more than 30,000 people in those woods

over the course of three years: Jews from the German Reich, Jewish and non-Jewish Latvians and Soviet prisoners of war. More people were murdered here than in any other place in occupied Latvia.

The Riga Committee, the German War Graves Commission and their supporters in Latvia deserve our thanks for the fact that the dead have not been forgotten, and that anyone who visits Bikernieki today will come across traces and testimonies of the people who were murdered here. They have investigated the traces left by both the victims and the perpetrators.

The exhibition thus enables us to examine our own history as well as the history we share. Together, we hope that the knowledge we gain from this work will prevent us from relapsing into barbarism. And we place our trust in the connections that have been built up, under new auspices, as part of the joint work that has been conducted here.

THE GRAVE AND MEMORIAL SITE IN BIKERNIEKI AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE GERMAN RIGA COMMITTEE BY KARL-WILHELM LANGE

Under the terms of the German-Latvian War Graves Agreement, the Riga War Graves Commission shouldered its first challenge: to create a memorial for the Jews murdered in the Second World War by Germans and their mostly-local helpers.

The task - establishing a lasting contribution of the War Graves Commission to the culture of remembrance and mourning in Riga-Bikernieki with strong participation from both the Austrian and Latvian sides - was a challenge both in organisational and financial terms, but also in terms of the policy of the association. Above all, however, because of the

manner in which the Jewish community, Jewish victims' associations and their institutions were affected, this required a very high level of sensitivity and open dialogue, as I regarded the involvement of these groups as indispensable.

That is why I had declared the work in Riga, and especially all the issues connected with the memorial in Riga-Bikernieki, to be a top priority.

The nature of the crimes of the Shoah precluded any thought of building the memorial in Riga along the lines of the impressive

designs of the more than 800 military cemeteries built by the War Graves Commission.

Under Soviet rule, the mass graves in the Bikernieki forest were left alone. That created a danger that the ongoing remembrance of the more than 35,000 dead buried here - the majority of them deported Jews from Germany, Vienna, and Theresienstadt; Latvian Jews; and Soviet prisoners of war - would gradually die out.

The historian Margers Vestermanis and Alexander Bergmann, chairman of the "Association of Former Ghetto and Concentration Camp Prisoners of Latvia", and the Jewish community of Riga fought against this forgetting. In 1985, the Riga City Planning Department commissioned the architect Sergei Ryzh to design a memorial in the Riga-Bikernieki forest.

This provided a fortunate coincidence that allowed the War Graves Commission to fall back on his existing planning. In 1997, the War Graves Commission assigned Sergej Ryzh to carry out his planning in close coordination with the Jewish community of Riga, the Association of Former Jewish Ghetto and Concentration Camp Prisoners of Latvia, the Riga City Government and the Riga Brethren

Cemetery Committee. A few weeks after my election to the post of President of the War Graves Commission in November 1998, Sergej Ryzh presented the revised plans for the memorial.

Like a silent group of mourning guardians, 5,000 roughly carved granite stelae of varying heights surround the memorial site as a symbolic reminder of those murdered here in the Bikernieki forest. All visitors who are led by the highly-visible construction of white concrete elements to the black granite sarcophagus standing at the intersection must first pass through this group of stelae. Over many years, Sergei Ryzh has repeatedly hiked to this place, to observe its topography and its sorrowful history, and he has grasped its inner nature. He has succeeded here in creating an architectural masterpiece that will forever secure this unique Shoah memorial of the German War Graves Commission the outstanding rank it deserves among its memorials all over the world.

My proposal to implement this plan and to commemorate Riga-Bikernieki with a public act of remembrance on 30 November 2001 met with broad approval from all those involved.

On the morning of 30 November 1941, the first transport carrying 1,053 Berlin Jews arrived in Riga. On the same day, the first day of Advent 1941, the great murder of the innocent victims of the Riga Ghetto also began.

None of the people in that Berlin transport survived that day. The youngest to be murdered was two-year-old Heinz Loewenthal, and the oldest was 80-year-old Nathan Baer, while the bells of the cathedrals and churches in Riga and Berlin rang out the start of the Christmas festivities.



The Bikernieki memorial under construction 2000/2001.

According to the plans of Helmut Wehmeyer and Sergej Ryzh, construction work had to begin in April 2000 in order to allow for the public handover of the memorial site on 30 November 2001. I was thus faced with a period of twelve months to convince the hometowns of the deportees to join the "Riga Committee".

The founding of the German Riga Committee

With my plan to unite 13 large German cities and the city of Vienna under the auspices of the War Graves Commission to form the "Riga

Committee", I pursued the goal of recalling the names of the murdered, their fates and the forgotten place of their deaths to the memory of their hometowns, to symbolically give the victims back the citizenship rights that were

stolen through their deportation and to renew the torn bond with their hometowns. In the "Riga Committee", their hometowns were to symbolically assume responsibility for the injustice inflicted on their citizens at that time. Riga-Bikernieki should no longer remain a distant place with foreign, nameless victims, but should in future be interwoven with names, families, individual personalities, their merits and achievements in its local and city history, in the memory and in the thoughts of its citizens.

The names of the 13 major German cities which, according to the Gestapo's organisational plans, were to be used as control centres, i.e. as collection points to deportation for the Jews of their region, were known thanks to the files which were meticulously kept by German authorities and which were luckily preserved. Kassel had also been one of them. That's how I won Georg Lewandowski as the first fellow campaigner for the Riga Committee.

At the time, he was Lord Mayor of this "War Graves Commission city". With him and with Eberhard Diepgen, the Governing Mayor of Berlin, I soon had two weighty players on board, who were quickly joined by the city of Hanover with its Mayor Herbert Schmalstieg and, thanks to the preparatory work of Winfried Nachtwei, Member of the Bundestag, and also the cities of Münster, Bielefeld and the City of Peace, Osnabrück.

Dortmund, Düsseldorf and Cologne followed shortly thereafter. The city of Nuremberg was the last to join the alliance of cities.

Their accession was to take on special significance for the further development of the Riga Committee. Under the leadership of the city of Nuremberg, the cities of Bamberg, Bayreuth,

Coburg, Fürth and Würzburg simultaneously acquired membership in the Riga Committee. The Jewish inhabitants of these places had



The memorial plaque for those murdered in the city of Hamburg. Hamburg is one of the founding members of the Riga Committee.

been deported to Riga via the Gestapo office in Nuremberg. In the course of the next decade, another 30 cities followed this example, so that the Riga Committee, together with the cities of Brno, Prague, Riga and Terezin, which are also members of the Committee, has now developed into a unique alliance of cities in Europe's commemorative culture.

The founding phase of the Riga Committee ended with the ceremonial signing of the founding charter in the ballroom of the "Rotes

Rathaus" town hall in Berlin and the subsequent reception of its members in Bellevue Palace by Federal President Johannes Rau on 23 May 2000.

The construction of the memorial in the Riga-Bikernieki forest started as planned in April 2000. The Latvian construction companies did excellent work. Thus, the public handover of the gravesite and memorial, which I had prepared in negotiations with the Jewish community in Riga, could take place on 30 November 2001.

This closely-internationally-watched inauguration, through a moving ceremony involving the President and leading representatives of the War Graves Commission, together with survivors, relatives of the victims from all over the world and the mayors of their former home towns under the joint patronage of the President of the Republic of Latvia and the Federal Presidents of Austria and Germany, made the day a highly significant one for the European culture of remembrance and commemoration.

The Riga-Bikernieki memorial for the victims of the Shoah, but also the War Graves Commission's military cemeteries in Riga lie before us today like an open book that bears witness

to the history of the 20th century. To its catastrophes, its inhuman ideologies, of the horror of war, to our susceptibility to racial delusion and hatred, to the mass murder of millions of Jews by the National Socialists, to suffering, death and extermination in the prison and concentration camps and to their victims, who numbered in the millions. But at the same time they also testify to our ability to learn from our history, to be vigilant, to be humane, to be tolerant and to share responsibility for shaping a peaceful future, which manifests itself in remembering, in commemorating and in our peace and youth work.

Agnes Heller, the great Hungarian philosopher and witness of all the horrors of the 20th century, gave this human capacity an everlasting form in her essay "Forgetting and Remembering":

"In remembrance, in remembering, one can take responsibility for something that one did not do but could have done. It means taking responsibility for your own life and the life of your neighbour."

This will to assume responsibility in the present, through remembrance and commemoration, shapes and undergirds the peace, remembrance and youth work of the

War Graves Commission in Europe and throughout the world. And we give expression to this will in our remembrance of the dead, which accompanies us in our work whenever we recover victims of war, mourn them, escort them to their final resting place in the memorial sites of the War Graves Commission or maintain and care for their graves and memorial sites. Every year, the Federal President

closes the Volkstrauertag ceremony in the plenary hall of the German Bundestag with this secular prayer of the Federal Republic. I place its final lines at the end of this report in memory on my work for the War Graves Commission:

"Our responsibility is to peace among people at home and throughout the world."

TO THE MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS AND REMEMBRANCE FOR THE FUTURE - THE RIGA COMMITTEE

BY WINFRIED NACHTWEI

30 November 2001 - hundreds of people from Latvia, Germany and Austria gather in the Bikernieki forest in the eastern part of the Latvian capital Riga to hold a dignified memorial ceremony amidst 55 mass graves. Here, during the German occupation from summer 1941 onwards, thousands and thousands of Jewish women and men, children and old people - mostly from Germany - political activists and some of the Soviet prisoners of war were shot. In total, over 35,000 people were buried in the mass graves at this site. On 30 November 1941, the "Riga Bloody Sunday", the Nazi regime had killed around 14,000 Riga Jews and murdered all the 1,053 victims of the first deportation train from Berlin in Rumbula.

"Reichsjudenghetto"

More than 25,000 Jewish people were deported to Nazi-occupied Riga from the end of November 1941 until October 1942 and crammed into the previous Latvian Jewish ghetto (and the Jungfernhof camp). There were seven transports from Berlin, one each from Nuremberg/Würzburg/ Bamberg, Stuttgart, Hamburg/Lübeck/Kiel, Cologne, Kassel, Düsseldorf, Münster/ Osnabrück/Bielefeld, Hanover, Leipzig, Dortmund, four transports from Vienna, and three from Theresienstadt. The fact that the mass murder of German Jews began in Riga, including Kaunas in Lithuania and Minsk, is still little known in Germany today.

A breakthrough in remembrance

For almost half a century, the history of these deportations and the fate of their victims was virtually unknown in the West and the East.

In 1989, the author and his wife came across the houses of the former "Reichsjudenghettos" and the mass graves of Bikernieki and Rumbula. At the sites of the Nazi crimes there was not a single sign of remembrance for the deportees. Dozens of lectures on the Riga deportations and meetings with Jewish ghetto survivors from Latvia, Germany and all over the world raised awareness in individual German towns of the fate of the former next-door neighbours who disappeared in Riga. In 1991, for the first time, some German cities explicitly commemorated those who had been transported to Riga.

In Soviet Latvia, the Holocaust was systematically concealed. With the independence of the Baltic states and their democratic awakening, collective memory opened up in Latvia. As early as 1991, the German War Graves Commission was able to establish the first German cemetery for those killed in the Second World War on the territory of the former Soviet Union in Riga: a prisoner-of-war cemetery where German soldiers who had fallen in the region were also buried. For years, however, there was no plaque

or memorial stone commemorating the many thousands deported and murdered to Riga. The 55 Bikernieki mass graves remained a forgotten, lost place. Construction work on a planned memorial was suspended after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 due to the city of Riga lacking funds.

Initial memorial trips to Riga from the Münster and Osnabrück area, unforgettable encounters with ghetto survivors such as Alexander Bergmann and Margers Vestermanis, the founder of the "Jews in Latvia" museum, amplified voices in the German places of origin of the Riga deportations who were calling for a dignified memorial in the Bikernieki forest, but also demanding "compensation" for the few Holocaust survivors in the Baltic States.

In 1996, on the private initiative of Willi Mosel from Hamburg, three memorial stones for the Hamburg, Cologne and Bielefeld transports were erected at the New Jewish Cemetery in Riga. Initiated by Erich Herzl and Kurt Fräser, who had lost their parents in Riga, the "Riga Initiative" was formed in Vienna. With the support of the "Black Cross" and a prominent "Committee of Honour", this became an important actor pressing for a dignified memorial in Bikernieki. The German-Latvian War Graves Agreement, which came into force at the end of

1996, made it possible for the first time for the War Graves Commission to take care not only of gravesites for fallen German soldiers, but also of gravesites of deportees.

Under the leadership of the War Graves Commission and in cooperation with its Latvian partner organisation, the Riga Brethren Cemetery Committee, the city administration and the Riga Initiative, the Bikernieki memorial with its 5,000 stones of Ukrainian granite was built by the end of 2001 according to the plans of the Riga architect Sergej Ryzh.

Foundation of the Riga Committee

The newly elected president of the War Graves Commission in 1998, the former Braunschweig local government president, Karl-Wilhelm Lange, pushed the idea of a committee of cities. The association of cities was to anchor memory locally, broaden the political basis of the project and secure its financing. He succeeded, in winning over all the mayors of the 13 German places of origin of the deportation trains to this idea.

After a reception hosted by Federal President Johannes Rau, the assembled city leaders signed the founding charter of the "German Riga Committee" in Berlin on 23 May 2000.

In the agreement, the cities undertook, among other things, to "permanently preserve and commemorate the memory of their murdered citizens" and to contribute a total of 200,000 DM to the construction costs. In conducting its international youth camps for the Riga memorial, the War Graves Commission wanted to work closely with the member cities. "The maintenance of the site and the encounters between Latvian and German young people at the site create a living bond of remembrance and encounter between Riga and the German cities from which the collection transports originated."

Inauguration of the Bikernieki memorial site

On 30 November 2001, the elderly former ghetto and concentration camp inmates for the first time received widespread sympathy from Latvian and Western societies. After the speeches, among others by the Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga and the Minister of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia Fritz Behrens, representatives of the cities of the Riga Committee placed metal capsules with the lists of their citizens lost in Riga in the name shrine. It was as if the murdered were now being buried with dignity for the first time.

Around the memorial with the large memorial stone made of black marble stand the roughly hewn granite stones, arranged in 45 carefully planned-out squares. Panels embedded in the floor bear the names of the places of origin of the deportations. The crowded stones that measure between 20 centime-

tres and 1.1 metres symbolise the people and families murdered here and pressed together in mass graves. No two stones are alike. With their black, grey and reddish hues, they restore some individuality to those who were shot, buried, burned here without a name, their ashes scattered to the four winds. The paved forest path opens up the view to the mass graves on the right and left and is lined with concrete stelae. Stars of David, crosses and crowns of thorns symbolise the different groups of victims.

The Committee's areas of works

Two years later, the War Graves Commission and the Riga Committee, together with the



Reception by Federal President Johannes Rau on the occasion of the founding of the Riga Committee on 23 May 2000.

Foundation "New Synagogue Berlin - Centrum Judaicum" and the memorial "House of the Wannsee Conference", published the two-volume "Book of Remembrance" by Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle. The work contains the complete deportation lists with over 31,300 names, life data and individual articles on all deportations.

Since 2002, the War Graves Commission has also conducted annual international work camps in Riga with young people from Germany, Latvia and Austria. With logistical support of the German Armed Forces, the young people look after soldiers' graves from the First and Second World Wars as well as the Bikernieki memorial site. When I went to Riga

in 2012 for a work camp in the former ghetto, in Salaspils and Bikernieki, I met and spoke with young people who were very lively and thoughtful about the reasons for their holiday volunteering, their impressions and feelings. In the former "Bielefelder Straße", 17-year-old Anna from Linz/Austria read from the memoirs of Gertrude Schneider, who was deported from Vienna to Riga at the age of thirteen.



Holocaust survivor Margers Vestermanis with a group of visitors at the "Jews in Latvia" museum in 2007.



Inauguration of the Bikernieki memorial in 2001.

Growth

Over the years, more and more cities joined the Riga Committee. In 2013 the Committee contained 43 places of origin of deportees to the committee. In 2020 there were 64. Accession events linked to the Riga Committee regularly provide particularly moving

highlights of local remembrance culture. The War Graves Commission exhibition "Bikernieki - Forest of the Dead" was shown in many Riga Committee member cities.

In the meantime, dozens of memorial tours have been carried out by individual member cities and other organisations. Three commemorative trips run by the Committee (to Riga in 2010 and 2017, to Vienna in 2018) brought unforgettable encounters for the city representatives and young people who travelled with them. So far, five symposia in Magdeburg, Münster, Osnabrück, Recklinghausen and Berlin have promoted exchanges of experiences on remembrance work after the end of any living contemporary witnesses.

All this was made possible thanks to the reliable coordination of the War Graves Commission and the special commitment of individual member towns.

Remembering for the future

The German Riga Committee is a unique network in the German, and indeed international, culture of remembrance. The monstrous dimensions of Nazi crimes exceed any imagination and thus often remain anonymous and distant.

On the trail of the Riga deportees, the Nazi atrocities and the fates of the persecuted come closer, become more concrete and personal.

In Bikernieki, the Nazi perpetrators did everything they could to exterminate Jewish people and erase any memory of them. Since the 2000s, it has been impossible to miss in

Bikernieki, how personal memories are being resurrected: with name stones, with photos, with texts.

Bridges of remembrance built with the Riga Committee

- between cities of origin of the Riga deportations
- between Germany, Austria, Latvia;
- between formerly separate cultures of remembrance (around the German remembrance day "Volkstrauertag" or 9 November);
- between the generations.

Where young people take up the baton of remembrance work in school projects, work camps and memorial trips, remembrance for the future grows stronger.

THE MASS GRAVES IN THE FOREST OF BIKERNIEKI - THE HISTORY OF THE PLACE BY MARGERS VESTERMANIS

In no other place in Latvia did the German occupation forces murder so many people during the Second World War as in the Bikernieki forest. A memorial has been located there since 2001. There are 55 larger and smaller mass graves over an area of 2,885m². Even before the end of the war, a Soviet commission began recording and researching Nazi crimes. It estimated that 46,500 people were murdered in the Bikernieki forest

between summer 1941 and autumn 1944. However, this figure is only an approximation, because when the Soviet experts began to examine the mass graves in late autumn 1944, the pits were empty.

When the defeat of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front began to become apparent in the summer of 1943, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler personally ordered the murders

to be covered up. In order to erase all trace of these crimes, the pits were opened, the corpses burned and unburnt bones ground to dust. This work, which was known in SS language as "Enterdung" ["exhumation"], was entrusted to SS Standartenführer Paul Blobel, who headed the SS Special Commando "SK- 1005". Blobel's men began in Ukraine and then continued to burn the bodies wherever millions of people had been murdered after the Wehrmacht advanced to the east. The SS forced Jews and Soviet prisoners of war to do the work, and they were guarded by German police battalions.

For the removal of evidence in the Baltic States, the "Sonderkommando 1005-B" was formed under the leadership of SS-Sturmbannführer Walter Helfsgott. He arrived in Riga with his Sonderkommando on 9 April 1944.

Rudolf Lange, commander of the Latvian Security Police and Sicherheitsdienst, placed 30 Jews from the Riga-Kaiserwald concentration camp under his command. The prisoners were chained to trees during the work and had to sleep on the spot under the open sky. When their strength waned, they were shot and their bodies were burned along with those they had dug up. They were replaced by

new gravediggers from the Kaiserwald camp who had been sentenced to death. Word soon got around there that no one returned from the Sonderkommando's work site. An estimated 300 Jewish prisoners were murdered in this way.

With the withdrawal of the Wehrmacht from the territory of the USSR, other units of the "SK-1005" were also deployed in Latvia. They hurried to destroy the traces of the crimes. Although the SS tried to trap the smoke from the burning of the corpses on the ground using sheets of metal, the black clouds were impossible to miss. This is what a supervisor of the security police noted in a report in May 1944: "There is a rumour going around that the Germans are digging up the Jewish 'E' [execution] sites in great secrecy and burning the bodies. This also happened around Riga". The Special Commando "1005-B" only succeeded in burning the bodies in the mass graves in the forest of Bikernieki and around Salaspils. As the front was approaching Riga in September 1944, attempts to remove the traces of the murders were still in full swing. The Sonderkommando's haste is evidenced not only by individual execution trenches in Smerlis and Salaspils that were not opened, but also by 60 empty oil barrels that the Commando left behind in the Bikernieki forest.

The number of victims given by the Soviet Commission of Inquiry was an estimate. It was based on the volume of the excavated mass graves. The actual number of people killed in the Bikernieki forest is not known and can no longer be determined with certainty. But documents accessible today make it possible to get a much more precise idea of the extent of the crime. We also know more about the different groups of victims.

Most of the victims were Jews. Men and women, children and old people were murdered without distinction, simply because in the mind of the National Socialists they belonged to the "Jewish race". The so-called "politicals" constituted the second group: functionaries from the time of the Soviet occupation in 1940/41 and members of the resistance against the German occupying power. The third group consisted of Soviet prisoners of war.

The first murders in the Bikernieki forest took place at the very beginning of the occupation. At the beginning of July 1941, Jewish prisoners from Riga Central Prison were shot. The documents of the National Socialists are only preserved in very fragmentary form. Nevertheless, they show that in the Bikernieki forest alone, during the first two weeks of the

occupation, Latvian Jews were murdered. By the end of August, there were about 6,000. It can be assumed that in the first wave of exterminations even closer to 7,000 people were murdered. As early as mid-September 1941, the SD described the Riga prisons as almost "free of Jews". Only 172 Jews were still there.

However, the tragedy of the Jews in the Bikernieki forest did not end there. The SD reports testify that, up to the next three years until the end of the occupation, another 1,000 Jews were taken from Riga Central Prison to the Bikernieki forest and shot there. In total, about 8,000 Latvian Jews were murdered there.

Thousands of Jews from Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic were also murdered in the Bikernieki forest. According to Wolfgang Scheffler's calculation, approximately 28,000 Jews were deported to Riga. According to the data of the Commissioner General's "Labour Office", of these only 11,000 were taken to the Riga ghetto. The approximately 1,000 people who died during the transport were buried at the point where the trains arrived, i.e. the Skirotava railway station. About 2,000 perished in the Jungfernhof camp (Jumpravmuiza), and thousands more men

perished in the Salaspils camp. The rest, numbering around 11,000 to 12,000 people, were murdered in the Bikernieki forest. The total number of murdered Latvian Jews and Jews deported to Latvia thus amounts to approximately 20,000. The number of other people murdered in the Bikernieki forest is much lower. In mid-July 1944, there were only about 600 prisoners in Riga Central Prison, "Politicals", by September, amounted to 3,569. After that, the number of prisoners in the central prison hardly changed. Due to regular "relief of pressure on the prison", the number of detainees remained about the same. Edgar Anderson estimates that under the German occupation about 30,000 Latvians, Poles and Russians were murdered.

Because of a typhus epidemic and the harsh winter of 1941/42, the Germans did not bring people to the Bikernieki forest for a while. Records of shootings of prisoners from the Central Prison in the Bikernieki forest have also been preserved for the year 1942. They show that 1,319 people were murdered between February and November. In 1942 and especially in 1943, the composition of the prisoners in Riga's Central Prison changed. The Soviet functionaries had already been shot in 1941/42 or deported to Salaspils or died in prison. After that, the jail mainly held

people who were active underground and had supported partisans or helped prisoners of war. They seemed particularly dangerous to the National Socialists. They too were murdered in the Bikernieki forest. The lawyer Munkevics, who had been arrested in the summer of 1941, tried to keep a list in which he noted the names of those who were taken away to be shot. According to this list, approximately 5,000 people who had previously been imprisoned in the Riga Central Prison were murdered in the Bikernieki forest during the entire period of the German occupation. This figure seems suitable as a "working hypothesis".

In addition, Soviet prisoners of war were buried in mass graves in the Bikernieki forest. They had already died of hunger, illness and hypothermia during the deportation. A particularly large number of Soviet prisoners of war died in the harsh winter of 1941/42. The largest mass graves of Soviet prisoners of war are not in Bikernieki, but in Ziepniekkalns, Bisumuiza and in the Jewish cemetery of Smerlis. There is evidence in the sources that corpses of Soviet prisoners of war were brought to the Bikernieki forest from the central camp "Stalag 350" and the Grizinkalns barracks in Pernava Street.

How many prisoners of war were buried in the Bikernieki forest can no longer be determined exactly. When the pits were opened after the end of the war, all that was found there were ashes and black, half-burnt human remains caked with diesel oil. They certainly number in the thousands, but not tens of thousands, as is often said. All events in the Bikernieki forest were under the control of the SD. The prisoner-of-war camps, on the other hand, were

under the control of the Wehrmacht. The SD would not have allowed the "competing" department to take up too much of its territory. Overall, it must be assumed that the number of prisoners of war buried in the Bikernieki forest was in no case greater than 10,000 and the total number of victims murdered and imprisoned there was not greater than 35,000.



The individual grave fields are bordered with stones and marked by natural stone stelae.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE RIGA - BIKERNIEKI GRAVES AND MEMORIAL SITE

BY SERGEJ RYZH

Historical context

In the years 1941-1944, the Nazi occupation forces and their helpers murdered tens of thousands of people in the Bikernieki forest near Riga. Their first victims were Riga Jews who were deported to the forest on the other side of the city at that time and shot there.

Later, former employees of Soviet authorities from the Riga prison and the inmates of the city's psychiatric hospital were brought to this place and murdered. The Germans also buried

hundreds of Red Army soldiers, who had first been forced to dig trenches for the bodies of those shot and were subsequently executed themselves or died of hunger, in the Bikernieki forest. Finally, the Nazis deported tens of thousands of Jews from other parts of Latvia, from the German Reich, from annexed Austria and from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to Riga to be murdered there.

In total, about 35,000 people were murdered in the Bikernieki forest. The exact number is unknown.

When the Red Army advanced towards Riga in 1944, the German occupation authorities had the bodies of those murdered dug up, doused with diesel oil and burned. The remains were then re-buried in the same place. They forced Jewish men from the Kaiserwald concentration camp in the north of Riga to do this work. These men were then shot and the bodies buried there as well.

An initial investigation of the site was carried out by a Soviet special commission appointed in 1945. It identified 41 mass graves. In the 1960s, these sites were framed with border stones and a memorial stone was erected in

memory of the murdered "peaceful Soviet citizens".

Initial plans for a memorial

In 1986, the Riga City Council commissioned the architectural firm "Komunālprojekts" to develop a design for a memorial site. With the help of files from the historical archives, in which the findings of the Soviet special commission were recorded, two sites were investigated, one measuring seven hectares and the other three hectares, on both sides of today's Bikernieki Street. The architect's office was helped by Sergei Shvilps, who was



The main entrance to the memorial.

brought to the Bikernieki forest at the age of 13 as a member of a resistance group operated by the Communist Youth League, where he was to be shot like his comrades, but survived. He was able to give the team clues to other mass graves that the Soviet commission had not documented in 1945.

That same year, in 1986, the city decided on one of the drafts proposed by Komunālprojekts for the design of the site. The Latvian Association for Jewish Culture, the Association of War Veterans and the Latvian Association of Architects approved the resulting project outline in 1987. Work began in 1990, but was suspended in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union due to a lack of funding.

Hope for the completion of the memorial resurfaced in 1993 when Holocaust survivor Erich Herzl came to Riga from Vienna. His parents had been deported from Austria to Riga in 1941 and shot in the forest of Bikernieki. After he had visited the unfinished memorial, Herzl resolved to do everything in his power to make it possible to complete the memorial. He turned to the "Austrian Black Cross" (ÖSK), an organisation that works to establish, maintain and preserve war graves. In 1996, the Riga City Council approved the

completion of the project under the direction of the ÖSK. The latter had already contacted the "Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge" (German War Graves Commission), which now acted as the official client for the memorial. One of the first steps was the founding of the Riga Committee, which brought together cities from Austria, Germany and Latvia.

After the War Graves Commission had agreed to a minor revision of the original project and had contributed its own ideas, a team of architects from the offices of "Komunālprojekts" and "Malas" were commissioned to prepare and implement a new design.

The gravesite and memorial

The work, supervised by the War Graves Commission, under its then president Karl-Wilhelm Lange, began in April 2000 and was completed in November 2001. In the same month, the Riga-Bikernieki gravesite and memorial was inaugurated.

In addition to Latvian President Vaira Vīķe Freiberga and ambassadors from several countries, the mayors of the cities from which Jews were deported to Riga took part.



The centre of the memorial.

At the main entrance to the memorial on Bikernieki Street, an angular archway was erected that catches the eye from the street. Next to it, two plaques made from polished black granite provide information about the events of 1941-1944 and the creation of the memorial.

The memorial structure itself fits into the terrain, which forms a hollow at this point. This section of the forest is where the greatest number of people were murdered and their bodies buried in mass graves. The sloping terrain gives the impression that the earth is opening up here. At the bottom of the swale, 5,000 rough-hewn granite stones were placed

in memory of each of the thousands of people who went to their deaths here. Towards the slope, the memorial is enclosed by a 70 centimetre high concrete retaining wall, which reinforces the impression that "the earth is opening up" here.

The stones stand in squares with sides measuring 4.5 x 4.5 metres, bordered by slab paths, symbolising the mass graves. There are between 110 and 120 stones in each of these squares. The rigid division symbolises the planned murder actions of the National Socialists. Just like the murdered people, no two stones here are alike. They have different colourings and are of different sizes. The smallest are 50 centimetre high, the largest 110 centimetre.

The stones stand closely packed, like the people before their murder. A surviving photograph from the 1940s shows hundreds of people on their knees, probably shot shortly afterwards. Some of the stones are grouped like families. One recognises parents trying to protect their children, brothers, sisters united in the face of death. In each of the squares, the stones are grouped differently. Slabs of polished black granite set into the ground bear the names of the towns from which people were deported to the Bikernieki forest.



The altar stone in the centre of the memorial.

A symbolic chapel was erected in the middle of the square, where the axes of the memorial path - through which the people were driven to the pits - and today's central access path meet. It is formed of two concrete arches six metres high, orthogonal to each other. Where the arches meet, they form a cross - a symbol that has always stood for execution and death.

In the centre of the symbolic chapel is an "altar" - a cube of black polished granite. Metal capsules containing lists of names of those

murdered are embedded in the 1.5 metre high cube. The mayors of the towns from which the victims came embedded these capsules in the stone at the dedication ceremony before it was covered with a slab.

On the sides of the altar stone is a verse from the Tanach (Old Testament) in Hebrew, Latvian, Russian and German:

"O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place."
(Job 16, verse 18).

The chapel is the compositional centre of the memorial and the venue for commemorative events. The smooth, white concrete of the chapel contrasts with the dark colours of the rough-hewn granite stones. This contrast is a central, symbolic element of this place. The path through the forest where the mass graves are located is lined with concrete stelae on which the Star of David, the cross and the crown of thorns symbolise the groups of victims. The crown of thorns stands for the murdered prisoners of war of the Red Army (whom Stalin called traitors), the cross for all other victims besides the Jews and the Red Army soldiers. The stelae are crowned by steel thorns, symbolising the path of suffering to death. The mass graves were newly



Different concrete stelae for the different groups of victims line the paths.

edged and covered with a granite stone or marked a small group of such stones to make them visible in the forest.

Thanks are due for the support in the planning and construction of the memorial: E. Herzl (Vienna), K.-W. Lange (formerly

President of the German War Graves Commission, 1998-2002), E. Bahr (formerly a representative of the War Graves Commission for the Baltic Countries). The same goes for the Austrian Black Cross. For the support of the project in Latvia thanks are due to G. Krupnikov, A. Bergman,

M. Vestermanis, A. Kletskin, E. Upmanis, the poet U. Berzins and many others. Special thanks are due to my colleagues G. Lobasheva and I. Vitola, who were involved in the design of the memorial, as well as to the construction supervisors N. Baikov and A. Zaydel.

COMMEMORATION OF THE HOLOCAUST

IN RIGA - HISTORY AND PRESENT

BY PAULA OPPERMAN

In 1918, the independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed. The constitution ensured equal rights for the Jewish minority, which made up about five percent of the population. Jews participated in cultural and political life, but were also subjected to anti-Semitic attacks. In 1934, Latvian nationalists carried out a coup and established an authoritarian regime. In June 1940, as a result of the Hitler–Stalin Pact, the Soviet Union occupied

Latvia and destroyed the political and social structures of the country through terror. On 14 June 1941 the regime sent over 14,000 people to Siberia. A few days later, on 22 June, National Socialist Germany attacked the Soviet Union. On 1 July, the Wehrmacht captured the Latvian capital Riga. Many Latvian residents welcomed the Germans as liberators. For the Jewish Population, years of persecution were beginning. Over 70,000

of the approximately 90,000 Latvian Jews were killed during the German occupation from 1941 to 1944. They were shot by German criminals and Latvian accomplices, or else they died from cold and disease in ghettos and concentration camps. The few survivors experienced the end of the war as liberation. But the invasion of the Soviet troops from 1944 onwards meant renewed foreign rule and oppression for the population. The memory of the victims of the Holocaust is preserved to this day, but the marks left by Soviet rule overshadow the crimes against the Jews for the Latvian majority of society.

Memory in the Cold War

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, survivors made efforts to commemorate those who had been murdered and to shed light on the crimes. But Soviet remembrance policy did not provide for a specific commemoration of the Holocaust. Latvian complicity in the murder of the Jews was also largely concealed. During Stalinism, the only thing celebrated was the victory over fascism. After Stalin's death, history was written as one of common suffering and struggle of all Soviet peoples. Jewish life in the Soviet Union was suppressed. Despite

the threat of repression, activists erected memorials and held commemorative ceremonies, especially from the 1960s.

The commemoration remained a primarily Jewish project, to which the rest of the population paid little attention. Especially among Latvians in Western exile, the memory of the fate of those Latvians deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities in 1941 and 1949 took centre stage. The deportations symbolised a Latvian history of suffering. The fact that a high proportion of the people deported in 1941 had been Jewish was not noticed. At the same time, the myth put about by National Socialist propaganda persisted that Jews had played a leading role in the Soviet terror of 1940/41. The alleged Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy still serves as an explanation for Latvian complicity in the Holocaust. Likewise, the horror of Soviet rule still legitimises the veneration of the Latvian legion of the Waffen SS. Latvian men fought under German command on the Eastern Front and were also involved in crimes against the civilian population. Many, though not all, had volunteered. They were revered after the war, especially in Latvian communities in exile, for having fought against Bolshevism. The Soviet press publicly denounced Latvian perpetrators, many of whom managed to flee Latvia after the war.

Controversies after regaining independence

The consequences of selective memory became apparent after the restoration of independence in 1991. The end of Soviet censorship enabled independent research into German occupation and extermination policies. The "Jews in Latvia" Museum was founded. For a long time this was the only institution that provided information about the Holocaust and Jewish life in Latvia. But in the eyes of the public, these issues were of little importance.

Anti-Semitism remained a widespread phenomenon in the 1990s. Twice, right-wing radicals carried out bomb attacks on a Riga synagogue, and a Holocaust memorial in the port city of Liepāja was desecrated.

The memory of the Second World War was dominated by the veneration of the SS veterans who were honoured every year in Riga at large events on 16 March.

In the context of Latvia's rapprochement with NATO and the EU, Latvian commemorative culture has been increasingly interrogated. International public opinion demanded a critical examination of history. In response, the three Baltic states established historical



Monument in Rumbula, erected in 2002 according to the plans of architect Sergei Ryzh. Names of murdered people are engraved on the stones. Paths with street names from the ghetto lead to the Menorah in the centre. Elements of the memorial from the 1960s remained.

commissions, which began to research the period of the World War and the Holocaust. Their findings were initially of limited significance for Latvian society, but opened up the first debates in the public sphere. For example, the "Latvian Occupation Museum", which was mainly dedicated to the Soviet period, belatedly included in its exhibition themes relating to the role of

Latvian perpetrators in the German apparatus of occupation and extermination.

Commemorative culture in the 21st century

Even before Latvia's accession to the EU in 2004, research and remembrance of the Holocaust was expanding. Since 2002, the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Latvia has been finding out the names and life stories of Jewish people who were murdered by German and Latvian perpetrators. In the meantime, a digital encyclopaedia on Holocaust crime scenes and places of remembrance has been added. A major role was played by the erection of new monuments in the forests of Biķernieki and Rumbula in 2001/2002. They are now central places of remembrance in Latvia.

The museum landscape also expanded. In 2010, the organisation "Shamir" opened the "Riga Ghetto Museum". In 2011, the Latvian Occupation Museum and the "Jews in Riga" Museum created a joint exhibition on the mass shooting in Rumbula. The exhibition is still accessible online. A further milestone was the Žanis Lipke Museum, which opened in 2012 in Lipke's former residence in Riga. The dockworker Lipke hid and helped about 40 Jews with a network of supporters.



Ruins of the great choral synagogue in Riga. On 4 July 1941, Viktor Arājs and his men herded more than 300 Jewish people into the building and set it on fire. After the war, the Soviet administration levelled the ruins and built a park over them. It was not until the end of the 1980s that a memorial stone was erected. Since 2001, the uncovered ruins have been a site for commemorative events.

The museum organises public debates and explores new avenues in museum education; an educational centre about civil courage is planned for the coming years.

The entertainment industry is also reflecting a growing interest in war and the Holocaust. Cinema productions such as "Tēvs nakts" (Father Night, 2018) about Žanis Lipke are a national success and break with traditional

representations. The book adaptation of Gunārs Janovskis's "Pilsata pi Upis" (Town by the River, 2020) about a small town in eastern Latvia during the Second World War also deals with the murder of the local Jewish population. The film shows that this murder represented a loss for the entire nation. But this remains exceptional in a society that often does not perceive the Holocaust as a part of its own history. This



Opposite the ruins of the synagogue, a memorial was erected in 2007 in honour of those who had hidden Jewish people.

is particularly evident in discussions on the topic of collaboration. Overall, Latvian complicity is not concealed, but it is often reduced to the so-called Arājs Commando.

This unit murdered Jews throughout Latvia as part of the German security police, but was supported by officers and police in the localities in which they operated. Parts of the non-Jewish population enriched themselves with the property of those murdered.

After independence, the Latvian state failed to bring charges against collaborators. Herberts Cukurs, a famous Latvian pilot in the 1930s

and later a member of the Arājs command, was also investigated posthumously. According to historical documents and numerous witness statements, Cukurs held a high rank in the Commando and was directly involved in the murder of Jewish people.

After the war, he fled to South America, where agents of the Israeli secret service are thought to have killed him in 1965. In 2006, the Latvian Prosecutor General's Office opened investigations against Cukurs under section 71 (concerning genocide) of the Criminal Code, but closed the case in 2018 due to lack of evidence. One year later, the Jewish community was able to achieve the reopening of the case. In 2014, a much-discussed

musical celebrated Cukurs as a hero and saviour of the Jews, even though his crimes were public and well-known. The Cukurs case is an example of how dealing with the Holocaust in Latvia remains controversial

and is not seen as important to some parts of the population. Overall, however, since the turn of the century, a more self-critical engagement with history has been enriched by research and educational institutions.

Authors

Karl-Wilhelm Lange

has helped shape Lower Saxony's municipal politics over a long period of time. He was city director in Hann. Münden and District President of the Braunschweig District. For many years he was committed to the War Graves Commission and was its president from 1998 to 2002.

Winfried Nachtwei

worked for many years as a teacher at a grammar school in Münsterland. From 1994 to 2009, he was a member of the German Bundestag for the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen parliamentary group. Since the end of the 1980s, he has been involved in remembrance work in Riga. He is an expert on peace and security policy and a board member of the association "Gegen Vergessen – Für Demokratie (Against Forgetting - For Democracy)".

Paula Oppermann

is a historian with a focus on Latvian history. Her research focuses mainly on anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and its consequences in Latvia. In addition to her work in academia, she has also been active in historical education work, including at the "Topography of Terror Foundation".

Sergej Ryzh

is an architect and member of the board of the design office "MALAS" in Riga. He led the project to build the memorial in Bikernieki.

Mārgers Vestermanis

was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust in Latvia. The historian dedicated himself to researching the Holocaust in Latvia and founded the museum "Jews in Latvia" in Riga in 1989. He taught Jewish history and the history of the Holocaust at the University of Latvia, has given numerous lectures and published widely in Germany and Latvia.

List of cities of the RIGA Committee

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Gelsenkirchen (08.11.2007) Mönchengladbach (02.03.2018)
Magdeburg (25.02.2008) Oberhausen (27.06.2018)
Recklinghausen (05.03.2009) Leverkusen (19.09.2018)
Gütersloh (09.11.2009) Borken (14.10.2018)
Haltern am See (27.01.2010) Südlohn (18.10.2018)
Marl (27.01.2010) Bottrop (27.01.2019)
Viersen (14.06.2010) Wesel (05.02.2019)
Herford (17.05.2011) Heek (23.10.2019)
Moers (04.10.2011) Nottuln (14.01.2020)
Marburg (04.09.2012) Lemgo (05.06.2020)

Symbolically recorded

Brünn *Brno* Riga
Prague *Praha* Theresienstadt *Terezin*

Recommended reading

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<http://www.rgm.lv>

The Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive:
<https://en.jfa.huji.ac.il/>

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P. 15, 16: Winfried Nachtwei

P. 23, 25, 27, 28: Sergei Ryzh

P. 32, 34: Ronnie Golz

P. 33: Foundation Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas

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