

OPENING REMARKS AT THE EVENT IN LONDON TO COMMEMORATE THE
NATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY OF LITHUANIA

AMBASSADOR OF LITHUANIA H.E. RENATAS NORKUS

25 September 2017

Dear Members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews

Dear Rabbi Gluck

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear friends

Shalom!

As you may have noticed, we are starting a new season here at the Embassy of Lithuania in the United Kingdom along with a few new members, including myself, and I would like to begin by expressing our commitment to continue this very meaningful tradition that was begun by our predecessors – to gather here each September, and commemorate the Day of Remembrance for Shoa victims of Lithuania.

Lithuanian Day for the Remembrance of Lithuanian Jewish victims is marked on September 23. This was the day in 1943 when the Vilnius ghetto was liquidated.

Holocaust is one of the most painful themes in Lithuanian history. During those years (between 1941-1944) Lithuania lost a very substantial part of its society - almost all of our Jewish compatriots - more than 200 000 human lives.

It also means that we lost a very important part of our historic and cultural heritage shared between Lithuanians and Litvaks for almost 700 years. We lost a unique phenomenon, which was known in the World and was called the Northern Jerusalem.

What is most appalling is the brutality of the way in which the Jewish people were wiped out. The extent of monstrosity and cynicism shown by human beings is so impossible to comprehend that the process of realization has been taking a long time. But coming to terms with the Holocaust (and our role in it) is of utmost importance for humanity. And this process still continues.

We witness how the understanding of the Holocaust in my country has evolved throughout recent years. The Lithuanian Government attaches great importance to this issue and makes efforts to improve education about the Holocaust, to openly and honestly delve deeper into the tragedy of Lithuanian Jews during the Nazi occupation that sadly included also a local collaboration.

Among the biggest achievements over the past five years, it is worth mentioning the closer involvement of the Lithuanian public, especially of the young generation, in commemorating Shoa in Lithuania. The turning point I would say was the Moletai Holocaust Procession last year, which drew as many as 4000 people to walk the route along which 2000 Jews were marched to their deaths 76 years ago. It was indeed a meaningful, symbolic and moving moment as both groups - Lithuanians and Jews - were together again.

Today (on Sept 25) in the Lithuanian Parliament, Seimas, an international conference called "Diaspora and Heritage: The Shtetl" is taking place. Last week for the seventh year in the run-up to the Day of Remembrance of the Lithuanian Jewish Victims of Genocide, organizers of the civic initiative NAMES invited Lithuanian citizens to remember and honour the victims of Shoa by reading out-loud the names of those murdered.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no room for complacency! Much remains to be done, however, to raise awareness and deepen the understanding of the Holocaust, to toughen intolerance to anti-

Semitism, to research, preserve and restore the Lithuanian Jewish cultural heritage.

I hope that our event today will also make a humble contribution to the process of embracing the reality of the darkest pages of the past. I am very glad that today after the candle-lighting ceremony, we will transfer for a while to a certain realm of miracles. We will see the documentary produced by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, which will tell us a real story about those who made different choices in the swing of history. These choices not only saved lives, but humanity.

I am thrilled that today we have among us the grandchild of the famous opera singer Kipras Petrauskas, to represent the family of the Righteous Amongst the Nations. Kipras Šimulynas arrived to this screening from Luxemburg. I would like to express my profound respect to your family, Kipras.

Moreover, we have Danutė Pomeranckaitė and her husband Yuri Mazurkevich – two internationally acclaimed musicians – as our guests of honour of this evening. Danute flew over the Atlantic Ocean from Boston to share her story and experience with all of us, giving us hope that the light can defeat the darkness. Our sincere gratitude goes to you, dear Danute!

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Kamilė Rupeikaitė, who came over from Vilnius to represent the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum and introduce the documentary; I am pleased to note that she is also a grand-daughter of one of the Lithuanian Righteous of the Nations (Balys Simanavičius) – according to the latest data there are 892 Lithuanians who have been honoured with this title by the state of Israel for saving Jews during the World War II.

I also welcome Edwin Shuker who has kindly agreed to address our audience on behalf of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and

finally – Rabbi Gluck who will honour us this this evening by performing a candle-lighting ceremony and sharing his thoughts.

I hope we will experience beautiful moments here tonight – as we all share *the same commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it, same commitment to respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice (extract from the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust).*

Thank you for your attention.