

The Legacy of a Jewish Community – its Preservation and Inheritance - Mazheik as an example

by Ephraim Lapid ¹

In collaboration with Ilan Ganot²

Introduction

On the eve of World War II, about 800 Jews lived in the town of **Mazheik (Mazeikiai** in Lithuanian) in Lithuania. After launching Operation Barbarossa, the Germans conquered the town on the 25th of June, 1941. The Jews were ordered to leave their homes and make their way to the Beit Midrash, which was being used as a transit station. They stayed there for a few days and were then transferred to barns near the Venta River, where the men were separated from the women and children. The men were sent to do forced labour.

On the 3rd of August, 1941 (10th Av, 5701), the men were moved by Lithuanian nationalists to shooting pits, that had been dug next to the Jewish cemetery, and shot to death there by them. Six days thereafter, on the 9th of August, 1941 (16th Av, 5701), the same Lithuanian nationalists murdered the women and children, in the same place. Together with the Jews of Mazheik, many Jews from surrounding towns were also murdered there. The Report of the Soviet State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Nazis and their Aides states that more than 4,000 bodies were found at the site of the shooting pits.

This year, on the 10th of Av (19th July, 2021), 80 years will have passed since the destruction of Mazheik's Jewry – first the murder of the men, and on the 16th of Av (25th July, 2021) the murder of the women and children. This is a community and family opportunity for future generations to remember the family members who perished in the Holocaust.

My father, Eliezer-Zvi Lipnitzky, was born in Mazheik, Lithuania, and was active in its Zionist institutions, Zionist Federation and "Maccabi" Movement, until his immigration to Israel (then Palestine) in 1933. In Israel he was active in the preservation of the legacy of the Jewish Community of Mazheik; together with the Jewish National Fund, in 1959 he initiated the planting of a grove in the Forest of the Martyrs, near Eshta'ol (on the way to Jerusalem), and organized the holding of memorials in the Forest, every few years, until the number of attendees at these events diminished. He was also active in the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel and made sure to connect me with the values of the inherited Legacy, until his death in 1978.

The rest of my father's family remained behind in Mazheik. My grandfather, Shlomo Yitzchak Lipnitzky, and my uncle, my father's brother, Dov Be'er Isaac, were murdered. My four aunts, my father's sisters, Tzipora, Pnina, Bina and Nechama, to their good fortune, survived the inferno, after they had been transferred to the ghetto of Shavli. They immigrated to Israel illegally, were sent to Cyprus by the British and returned, finding a safe haven, in February, 1948. My aunts were active in the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust and passing on the legacy of Lithuania to the young generation.

Ways to preserve, commemorate and pass on the Legacy of the Community

After the Holocaust, families of survivors and families of those who perished, all over Israel, and even in other countries in the world, were active in the preservation of the memory of those who perished and the memory of the Jewish Communities before the Holocaust. Ways to preserve, commemorate and pass on the Legacy of the Jewish Communities in general, and the Legacy of the Holocaust in particular, crystallized, over the years, took shape and then changed, as the younger generations came to the fore.

In this chapter, we will review organizations and a variety of ways and methods of research, which may be adopted, relating to the preservation of the Legacy and commemoration of the Communities that were destroyed in the Holocaust, while focusing on the **Community of Mazheik**, as an example. In part, the 'ways' deal with wider aspects, that relate to

Jewish Communities and the Holocaust in general, or to the Holocaust in specific countries, whereas a minority (of the 'ways') relates to a specific city or town.

The following list includes specific examples that relate to Mazheik, indicating their current status.

- **Jewish sites in towns and cities in Europe**

In a number of European countries, especially in the big towns and cities, for example, Vilna, Kovne, Warsaw, Krakow, Berlin, and others, in which the Jewish Community survived, or was revived after the Holocaust, Jewish sites exist, for example, synagogues, cemeteries, community centres, and more, that had not been destroyed, or were partially destroyed and renovated after the Holocaust. A number of them have once again become active. Concentration camps and extermination sites also remained, in varying states of preservation.

In **Mazheik**, the entire Community was destroyed, leaving behind not a single Jew or Jewish site. A number of public Jewish buildings and houses of Community members still exist, but with no hint of their Jewish origins and no mention of their Jewish past. The Jewish cemetery was desecrated and almost completely destroyed – few tombstones, or remnants thereof, remain. The death pits of the destroyed Community, adjacent to the Jewish cemetery, have been marked and fenced in. Over the years, a number of monuments were erected. It is not known who is responsible for the maintenance of the site (the local authorities?) or if commemorative events are held there. The fear exists that with the passing of the years, the site will fall into neglect and disrepair.

- **Organizations in Israel, for the commemoration and passing on of the Legacy**

After the Holocaust, descendants of the first generation, in Israel, established organizational frameworks for expatriates from across Europe. Organizations were active, culturally and socially, initiating many commemorative events and, in many cases, giving financial assistance to survivors and their families. With the passing of the years, and the diminishing numbers of first-generation survivors, many such organizations ceased to exist (the Organization for Mazheik expatriates, for example). For Lithuanian expatriates, whose number is small, two Organizations are active: the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel and the Association of Jews from Vilna and its surroundings. Most of the activities in these Associations are initiated by the second generation (descendants of the first generation of survivors), in part by those born in Lithuania, and by many who were born in Israel.

Expatriates from **Mazheik** initiated and set up the Organization for Expats from Mazheik, which was headed by Eliezer-Zvi Lipnitzky. They worked towards the preservation of the Legacy of the Mazheik Community, and the commemoration of those that perished: the registration of those who perished in the 'Pages of Testimony' at Yad Vashem, installation of a memorial plaque in the Forest of the Martyrs, organizing memorial services, every few years, and more. With the diminishing of the number of active members from Mazheik, the Organization ceased to exist.

- **Meetings and annual memorials (Yahrzeit)**

Annual memorials and meetings of remembrance are initiated by various organizations and local authorities, usually on Yom haShoah - the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Day (27th Nisan), International Holocaust Remembrance Day (27th January), General Kaddish Day (10th Tevet) and within the different frameworks of expatriates from different communities.

- **Monuments to Lithuanian Communities**

In various places in Israel, monuments exist, to the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust. A number of these are general monuments, while others are dedicated to the memory of specific communities. To Lithuanian communities, monuments are found in the Valley of the Destroyed Communities at Yad Vashem (with the names of the Communities, including Mazheik), the Forest of the Martyrs (the original memorial stone in the depths of the forest was destroyed and

replaced with a memorial plaque in the communal Memorial Wall, in a central spot at the entrance to the Forest), and in the cemeteries of Nachlat Yitzchak and Kiryat Shaul in Tel Aviv.

Abroad: In the Vilna Synagogue (with the names of the destroyed communities, including Mazheik), the Holocaust Museum in Washington (with the names of the communities, including Mazheik) and others.

• Museums and Research Institutions

The field of research and teaching contemporary Judaism in general, and the Holocaust in particular, are a central subject in academic institutions and research centres in Israel and around the world. Holocaust education is included in the Education System of Israel.

In Israel, museums and institutions for research and commemoration exist. Among them are Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Ghetto Fighters Museum at Kibbutz Locamei haGetaot (Ghetto Fighters), the 'House of Testimony' at Kibbutz Nir Galim, 'Massuah' Museum at Kibbutz Tel Yitzchak, 'Moreshet' ('Legacy') in Giv'at Chaviva, Holocaust Museums in Washington, Berlin and Warsaw, the Museum of the Vilna Ga'on in Vilna, the Historical Museum in Mazheik and more.

Commemoration of the **Mazheik** Community: a number of these institutions possess material relating to the Mazheik Community. For a number of years, until his death in 2016, Algimantas Muturas, Curator in the Historical Museum of Mazheik, was intensively engaged in researching the Jewish Community; he even initiated and published a booklet (in Lithuanian), in memory of the Community, a list of its members from 1920 to 1941 (included in the MMWS Internet site), local Mazheik newspaper articles about the Jewish Community and more.

See: [http://mke.lt./Algimantas Muturas](http://mke.lt./Algimantas_Muturas)

• Written and Visual Documentation

Praiseworthy is the fact, that the history of Lithuanian Jewry has been researched and published by many historians. Testimony, memoirs and family stories of survivors and their relatives (oral and written), also the memoirs of residents of other towns and cities, from before the Holocaust, were collected and recorded, mainly when members of the first generation were still living. Over the years, books with personal memoirs have been published, as well as books of remembrance and books about specific communities. Much material can be found in public libraries and the libraries of institutions, which research the Holocaust, for example, the library at Yad Vashem, the National Library in Jerusalem, the library of 'Vilna House', the library of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and more.

Documentation relating to **Mazheik**: There is no 'Book of the Community' or 'Book of Remembrance' in existence, specifically dedicated to Mazheik. However there are chapters on the Mazheik Community in books, relating to Lithuanian Jewry in general, for example: 'Yahadut Lita' ('Lithuanian Jewry') (Volumes 3, 4), 'Lita' ('Lithuania') (Volume 1), 'The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry' (by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry), 'Remember and Be Remembered' (published by the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel) and more.

A list, in English, of literature relevant to Mazheik may be found via the following link:

<https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Mazeikiai/Mazheik%20Bibliographical%20List.htm>

Worth noting is the book by Yehoshua Trigor, native of Mazheik: 'The Litvak who survived, rescued, went to Eretz-Israel' (in Hebrew), published by Yuvalim publishing house, Jerusalem, 2004.

A chapter on Mazheik is included in the special book by Hadassa Levin, 'Daughter of my People - the path of suffering and faith of a daughter of Lita Jewry during the Holocaust' (in Hebrew), published by Bat Ami, Bnei Brak, 1996.

Additional documentation on Mazheik Jewry in general, and family stories in particular, have been collected, over the last two decades, by members of the second generation of survivors, in part as told orally by members of the first generation,

who were still living, at the time; included on the MMWS Internet site, dedicated to the memory of the Mazheik Community, to be mentioned further, below.

In recent years there have been many initiatives to produce films for viewing by the general public, or films by families and organizations. This trend is growing. Visual documentation on Jewish communities, including photos and documentary films, may be found in archives, libraries, Institutes and more. Noteworthy is the Steven Spielberg Archive of Jewish film, which includes 10's of 1000's of titles of movies from different periods and different communities.

Also, throughout the Internet, a great deal of visual documentation can be found, relating to Jewish communities in general, and the Holocaust period in particular.

Visual documentation on the **Mazheik** Jewish Community has been uploaded to the MMWS Internet site in commemoration of the Mazheik Community.

Link to the Photo Gallery: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/mazeikiai/PhotoGallery.htm>

Link to the video, which was made during the Kahana Family's visit to Mazheik in 2003 (soundtrack in Hebrew): <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=SWduZ1Gk7jQ>

As far as we know, there is just one video about Jewish Mazheik from before the Holocaust. It was made in 1928 by Wolf Rabinowitz, who had emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1915.

Link to the video: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=6MbLfNuEpDU>

• Archival material

Public and personal material relating to the Lithuanian communities can be found in the following archives: Lithuanian State Historical Archives in Vilna (LVIA), Kaunas Regional State Archives (KRA) and more. A partial list of Museums (and archives) may be found via the following Link: <https://www.litvaksig.org/information-and-tools/archives-and-repositories>

Within the framework of the JewishGen Organization and the LitvakSIG Association, extensive work has been done, locating and indexing archival material, relevant to Jewish communities, in general, and Jewish communities in Lithuania, in particular. Searching these Internet sites, relevant material can be located, and copies ordered directly from the archives. Link to LitvakSIG's search engine, the All Lithuanian Database: <https://www.litvaksig.org/all-lithuanian-database/search-ald>

An extraordinary archive is the YIVO Archive in New York. Authentic material, relating to Committees of the Jewish Communities, can be found here, from the period of Lithuanian autonomy, 1920 – 1923. Part of the material from the Committee of the **Mazheik** Community can be found in Yehoshua Trigor's book, which is mentioned above, and also in the MMWS Internet site.

See the following Link: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Mazeikiai/YIVO%20-%20first%203%20pages%20overview%20of%20mazeikiai%20jewish%20com.htm>

• Culture and Art

The Jews of Lithuania are widely represented in Literature and Poetry by expatriate writers and others. They wrote about Jewish life in Lithuania, before and during the Holocaust. Just to mention a few of them:

Leah Goldberg ('From the Songs of My Beloved Land' and other works), Avraham Sutzkever ('Under the Splendor of the Starry Sky'), Abba Kovner (poetry and prose), Shmerke Kaczerginski ('Quiet') and others.

Yehoshua Sobol wrote the play 'Ghetto' about the Vilna Ghetto (which was turned into motion picture).

The poet Yoram Taharlev, in expressing pride in his Lithuanian heritage, wrote, among other works, 'A Folk Tale – The Elite', in honour of the Community.

'The Nightingale of Vilna', Nechama Lifschitz, became principal Symbolist poet in the culture of Lithuanian Jews.

The painter Moshe Rosenthalis, with his talents, contributed to the subject with his paintings.

• Public Initiatives

As the younger generations became more active, taking over from the older, initiatives were taken for the memorialization, commemoration, education and passing on of the Legacy of the Holocaust, in particular to draw the young generation in Israel and the rest of the world closer to the subject. Among other initiatives, meetings on Holocaust Day in Israel, entitled '**Zikaron baSalon (Memory in the Lounge)**', may be mentioned, '**March of the Living**' at Auschwitz, **Trips to Poland** by students and soldiers ('**Edim beMadim**' ('**Witnesses in Uniform**'), international conferences on the Holocaust and more.

• Family Stories and Roots Projects

Family stories and Roots projects are written and undertaken within the framework of schools and by local initiatives. Family stories about the **Mazheik** Community, written by descendants of families from Mazheik, can be found via the following Links: https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Mazeikiai/memoirs_and_stories.htm , under 'Memoirs and Stories', and https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/mazeikiai/families_researched.htm , under 'Family Research'.

• Heritage Trips

In recent decades, heritage trips have become common, to countries, towns and cities, in which the parents or grandparents of the younger generations had lived. In the early years, tours were joined by still-living survivors, who could testify firsthand about the places visited. Also, a number of Heritage trips have been taken to **Mazheik**, over the years. Documentation can be found via the following Link: https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Mazeikiai/memoirs_and_stories.htm , under 'Roots' Trips and Stories.

• Internet Sites

An important and effective medium for the preservation of the Legacy is the Internet. Many sites include archival material, research and education about places, communities and the Holocaust. Some of the sites are managed by institutes and organizations, while others are solely 'virtual'.

Below are the most important and relevant ones to Lithuania, in general, and to Mazheik, in particular:

JewishGen – the top organization for Jewish Genealogy, in the world, provides genealogical information to enthusiasts and to professionals with the required tools in order to research Jewish family history. The organization holds conferences and events, but its chief importance lies in the huge amount of information it has stored on its web servers and which is available to anyone that requests it (subject to free registration).

Link to the Home Page:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/>

For example, Link to the JewishGen page on Mazheik:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/community.php?usbgn=-2616566>

LitvakSIG – special interest group for the research of Jewish Lithuania.

Link to the Home Page: <https://www.litvaksig.org/>

MMWS – Mazheik Memorial Website, site for the commemoration of the memory of the Mazheik Community, which was established by three descendants of Mazheik Community members and contains much material relating to the Community.

Link to the Home Page: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/mazeikiai/introduction.html>

Link to a partial list of additional Internet sites, relevant to Mazheik: <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/mazeikiai/Links-page.htm>

Conclusion

The important challenge of preservation and commemoration of Jewish Communities lies in the loss of interest among the young generations. These generations relate to the subject as 'History', without the personal or emotional component. Therefore, they are less involved with research, commemoration and preservation of the memory of the Community.

On our watch, at the present time, it is up to us to identify interested youngsters, willing to commit themselves to the preservation of the Legacy, through social media, cultural creativeness in song, literature and video, and social events. The Internet provides us with the right infrastructure for creativity in imparting knowledge and sharing the memory.

1 **Ephraim Lapid**, until the age of 23, **Ephraim Lipnitzky**, son of Zvi (from Mazheik) and Matia (from Neustadt), Lithuanians, proud of their heritage.

2 **Ilan Ganot**, until the age of 24, **Ilan Iting**, son of Moshe Iting (from Mazheik) and Yocheved née Spiegel (from Berlin).