

## **Rede von Michael Shemiavitz (Tel Aviv), Vorsitzender der „Vereinigung der Juden von Wilna und Umgebung in Israel“**

With Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, the German people were ex-posed to brain wash and poi-sonous propaganda. The Jews were displayed as an inferior race that poses a threat to the German culture.

The anti-semitic poison systematically infiltrated into the minds of millions of people and as a result the Nuernberg Laws came into being. These wicked laws deprived the Jews of their basic civilian rights and of their property. Their lives were in danger, their existence in peril.

The mass madness of hatred of Jews, eventually brought about the „Final Solution“, a premeditated genocide carried out by the state. Hundred of thousands were involved in the extermination apparatus, however the silence of the millions of Germans who were aware of the crime has been considered as an indirect assistance to this horrible sin.

Vast territories in the east, with an enormous Jewish population, were occupied, following the „Barbarosa Operation“ of the Soviet Union. Thousands of Jews were recruited to coercion labour that included working at German army units.

350 Jews, most of them highly skilled professionals, such as welders, locksmiths, tinkers, upholsterers and glaziers were employed in the army outfit of HKP in Vilnius, under the command of Major Karl Plagge.

Major Plagge, a loyal German officer, discovered the potential of his Jewish labourers being of high professional skills, knowledge, diligence and obedience and harnessed it to the German military efforts. He fairly and humanely treated his Jewish workers, which motivated them to work even harder.

When he found out that the Vilnius Ghetto was destined to annihilation, he saw to it that his 350 workers would not be expelled.

He persuaded the SS command, who were in charge of the Jewish camps, to let the HKP workers leave the Ghetto to another labour camp in the city. The Jewish workers refused to leave without their families and surprisingly he managed to also get the families out to the new camp.

This was a high-risk, life-saving operation, for which he could have been disposed from his role, or even worse, pay the ultimate price – his life.

I will tell you now my personal rescue story:

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1943, army and police guards surrounded the Vilnius Ghetto. They stormed the streets and allies, grabbed whoever they could find and onto trucks that awaited them at the Ghetto's gates. The liquidation of the Ghetto started.

12.000 Jews lived in the Ghetto, the remnants of a 70.000 strong community.

My mother and I fled to a pre-arranged shelter that hosted 35 more people. We stayed there for 17 days, until Yom Kippur, Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1943. On that day our shelter was exposed by the SS and the local police and we were led to the Gestapo headquarters.

A selection was held. The elderly, the women and children were taken away and I and 10 more men were taken to prison cells in the cellar of the building with more Jews who had been discovered in other hiding places in the Ghetto.

We were not deluded. We knew it was just a matter of time before we were destined to be taken to Ponnar Forest, where the Vilnius Jews were executed.

Approximately after 4 days, while we were wondering why we were still kept alive in the cells, we were taken out to a roll-call in the corridor. We were 110 men and after the counting process we were ordered to march out of the cellar to the foreground and onto trucks that awaited us.

We noticed that the route we were riding was not the one leading to Ponnar, which sparked a glitter of hope that we would stay alive and indeed we were led to the HKP camp.

Archive documents which were exposed many years later, proved that Major Plagge had been responsible for saving our lives. At the request of the Jewish workers he demanded for saving our lives. At the request of the Jewish workers he demanded support workforce to the camp and we were brought there to perform this roll.

Unfortunately, the good will of one person could not prevent nor stop extermination process. In March 1944 the workers' children were kidnapped and then butchered in Ponnar.

When the Soviet front neared Vilnius the German started to evacuate their forciers, including those of the HKP camp. Karl Plagge with the SS officers gathered the camp inhabitants and Major Plagge made the following speech:

„HKP inhabitants: the front is approaching near us and we are obliged to move the camp and it's facilities to Eastern Prussia and you will also be evacuated. You should know that from now on you will be under the command of the SS who will care for all your needs. I suggest that you

do not equip yourselves with food, nor take any parcels and packages.“ This was a very clear sign that under the SS we were to expect only one fate – extermination.

The Jews were feared and panicked. Hundreds started running to the fences, took them down and ran to the forested hills in the area. Others to refuge in cellars and bunkers they had prepared in advance.

The unfortunate rest of them were herded into lorries and to Ponnar and when the German ran out of gas and could not drive the Jews to Ponnar, they shot them inside the camp.

A few days later the Soviet army and groups of Jewish partisans arrived, just to find 350 corps of Jews, which they buried in mass graves.

500 Jews were fortunate to be freed and witness liberation day.

After the war, when I was in a DP camp, I was told that some survivors had contacted Major Plagge and since he had been in a poor economic condition, they had assisted him as much as they could.

We are very satisfied and content that our efforts have been successful and Yad-Vashem has declared Karl Plagge as „Righteous of the Nations“ and it is sad that he has not lived to witness this day.

In the name of the Association of the Vilnius Jews and the tens of survivors of the HKP camp, I would like to express my gratitude to the President and the Staff Members of the Technical University of Darmstadt for their actions to commemorate Karl Plagge, the graduate of the Engineering Faculty.

It is a great honour for your institute to have Major Plagge as one of your graduates and you should be proud of it.

Darmstadt, 15.April 2005