

Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung „Karl Plagge“ in Vilnius am 07. April 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Rachel Kostanian, Dear Markas Zingeris,

at first let me – also in the name of Hanni Skroblies and the members of the Darmstadt History Workshop – thank you very much for inviting the Karl-Plagge-Exhibition to this wonderful House with its symbolic name ‘Center of Tolerance.’

Why did we make this exhibition?

It began with the efforts of Jewish survivors of the Military Vehicle Repair Park, called HKP, in Vilnius, Olandu Street, and of the labour camp in Subocz Street, to find Major Plagge, the Commander of the HKP in the years 1941 to 1944. This German officer was in a very substantial way responsible for the protection and, finally, for the rescue of about 250 Jewish slave workers: women, men and children. Although they were not able to find any information about the fate of their rescuer, the survivors – no matter where they lived after their liberation – had never forgotten the words: ‘Major Plagge.’

Isaac and Josif Reches, for instance, mentioned Plagge’s name as the rescuer of their family when they visited Germany ten years ago. Pearl Good (former Perella Esterowicz) was questioned by her son, Michael Good, when they visited her hometown Vilnius in 1999: “How did it happen that you survived?” She answered: “I only know two words: Major Plagge.” Michael Good immediately tried to find this man by internet – and step by step a network of survivors and friends in Germany and elsewhere developed, who strongly supported his research. At the end they had reconstructed a picture of these three horrifying years in Lithuania and in Vilnius as well as a picture of Karl Plagge’s rescuing activities. It was the enduring thankful feeling of the survivors which led to the posthumous honouring of Karl Plagge as a “Righteous among the Nations” in Yad Vashem in 2005.

Soon after, the town authorities and the University of Darmstadt also honoured Karl Plagge and invited Holocaust survivors from Lithuania and representatives of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum to come to Darmstadt. This was the beginning – not only of multiple friendly relations to Vilnius – but also of a stronger involvement on the part of the Darmstadt History Workshop. We took it as a personal confrontation with the history of the Holocaust in Lithuania and especially in Vilnius.

After celebrations, discussions and moving encounters with survivors, we decided to create an exhibition. We wanted to show the rescuing activities of Karl Plagge in the overall context of the German occupation and extermination of Jewish Lithuania. In addition, survivors should be given a chance to speak about their rescue. At the same time it was necessary to clarify the decisive role German planners and executioners played together with their Lithuanian collaborators. And, not to forget, we wanted to show the importance of spiritual and practical Jewish resistance within the ghetto, the town and the resistance of the Jewish partisans (we greet you in solidarity, dear Fanja Brancowskaja!).

The basics for our work were the reports of the survivors, the results of Michael Good's research as well as documents given to us by the Jewish Museum here in Vilnius. We thank all those of you who helped with material and advice and who generously allowed us to make use of their work. We cannot mention the names of all our supporters but we would like to thank especially Michael Good and the members of the Plagge-Group; Irina Guzenberg from the Jewish Museum, thanks also to Arunas Bubnys, the historian – both are present – and to the wonderful painter Samuel Bak, who is a survivor of the labour camp in Subocz Street. He says that Karl Plagge is one of the ten miracles of his surviving.

In the middle of the Holocaust there is a very little but very important part telling not only from compassion but from active human solidarity. It is impressive for us to see that the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, the Jewish Community and the Lithuanian Government honour highly all known rescuers of Jewish lives.

Since 2007 the Plagge-Exhibition has been on tour through many schools and public institutions throughout Germany. The German foundation 'Memory, Responsibility and Future' in Berlin made possible the English edition of the Exhibition, the printing of the Lithuanian translation of the Exhibition's guide book as well as the Exhibition's transport to Vilnius.

We would like to thank the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture for the support given to this project and the intention to pass on the Exhibition into schools here in Vilnius. To us it is very important to tell this story especially to the younger generation – probably not only in Germany but also here in Lithuania.

Thank you and
Shalom.

(Christoph Jetter, Vilnius 07-04-09)