Ingrida Vilkiene, Deputy Director – the coordinator of educational programs at the International Commission on the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania

"World War II and Auschwitz as it is remembered in Lithuania"

How does the Lithuanian society remember the Second World War?

World War II reached Lithuania on 22 June 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Europe had been at war for almost two years by then. However, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union in June of 1940, so a year later (1941), when Nazi German troops entered Lithuania, the majority of Lithuanians welcomed them (with flowers) as liberators from the Soviets.

Part of the Jewish population of Lithuania also welcomed the Nazi troops with joy because, in 1940-1941, the Soviets nationalized (took away) the property of the richer Lithuanians and Jews who were wealthy or had businesses. Also, the Soviets closed many synagogues and schools where Hebrew was taught. Furthermore, just before the outbreak of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, between 14 and 21 of June 1941, 17,500 Lithuanians (Lithuanians, Jewish, Poles) were deported to Siberia.

At the beginning of the Nazi occupation (at the end of June 1941), some Lithuanians started to work in the institutions of the occupying authority. Some Lithuanians took part in the mass killings of Jews, which started at the end of June and continued until the return of the Soviets in mid-1944 and the new Soviet occupation.

During the Second World War, between 90 and 92% of Lithuanian Jews were killed in Lithuania (before the war, there were about 220,000 Jews; about 200,000 were killed).

About 4,000 ethnic Lithuanians were killed in Lithuania during the Second World War (killed as a result of the anti-Nazi resistance, the rescue of Jews, and also as accidental casualties).

According to the International Commission's expert historian from the USA, Prof. Saulus Sužiedelis, "For Lithuanians, the war did not start in June 1941, but in July 1944, with the return of Soviet occupation and repressions." That is when the resistance movement, also known as the partisan war, began.

In 2021, the International Commission (our institution) initiated a project called "The Road of Memory" to mark the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in Lithuania (1941). The idea was to organize commemorations in towns and townships on the dates on which the Jewish community of that area was killed: e.g., in Gargždai it was 24 June, Jurbarkas - 4 July, Kalvarija - 8 July, etc. The commemorative events were held in 34 places in Lithuania, but not everywhere. There are more than 200 sites in Lithuania where Jewish communities were killed. This shows that for a particular part of Lithuanian society, the Holocaust is not an important issue in the history of Lithuania because it is still believed that Jews are the "others." However, the 34 commemorations in small towns and townships also show that we already have a community of teachers and educators who have an objective view of history and involve students and local authorities in the events of historical memory.

What is the public memory of Auschwitz in Lithuania? Since 2019, we have been participating in the annual March of the Living at the Auschwitz Museum (teachers, educators, students) to "spread the word" about the crimes against humanity that took place in the largest concentration camp created by the Nazis during World War II.

More information about the links between the Lithuanian people and Auschwitz has recently emerged: for example, we recently commemorated the "extermination of children" in the Kaunas ghetto in 1944. During the event, it was emphasized that children under the age of 12 who were found in the ghetto were taken to the Auschwitz concentration camp to be exterminated. Also, on the recent 80th anniversary of the liquidation of the Šiauliai Ghetto in July 1944, it was publicly presented that the ghetto prisoners who were unfit for work had been transported to Auschwitz as part of the ghetto liquidation process. Thus, more and more information is becoming available about the link between the Lithuanian people and the history of Auschwitz. However, this is not enough, and it is, therefore, the duty of our historians, educators, and teachers to educate our society and spread knowledge.