

Rescuing the Jews in Lithuania during World War II: Practices of Creating a Lithuanian Museum Narrative

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Summary. Lithuanian historiography shows that the topic of rescuing the Jews in Lithuania during World War II (WWII) is intertwined into different narrative schemes: the pre-Holocaust story of the rescue of Jewish refugees at the beginning of WWII and the topic of the Holocaust in Lithuania. The question is: what narrative schemes of the rescue of the Jews are used in Lithuanian museums, what does the museum want to communicate to the public on the topic of the rescue of the Jews, by what means does the museum create a historical narrative, what historical cultural events promote the emergence of themes of the rescue of the Jews in one or another Lithuanian museum? The analysis of four cases (Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, ‘Sugihara House’ in Kaunas, The Ninth Fort of Kaunas, ‘Lost Shtetl’ museum under construction in Šeduva) is used to answer these questions. It revealed that the aim of the topic of rescuing the Jews is to present the most objective, all-encompassing image of this past and to perform several important functions with the help of it. This is the education of Lithuanian and foreign visitors (the museum as a space of knowledge), honoring, remembering and thanking the Jewish saviors (the museum as a memorial space), refuting stereotypes related to the rescue of Jews (the museum as a space of demythification).

Keywords: Rescuing the Jews, World War II, Holocaust, Lithuanian museums, exhibition.

Žydų gelbėjimas Lietuvoje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais: lietuviško muziejinio naratyvo kūrimo praktikos

Santrauka. Lietuviška istoriografija rodo, kad žydų gelbėjimo Lietuvoje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais tema įsiterpia į skirtingas naratyvines schemas: ikiholokaustinį Antrojo pasaulinio karo pradžios žydų pabėgėlių gelbėjimo pasakojimą ir Holokausto Lietuvoje temą. Klausina: kokios naratyvinės žydų gelbėjimo schemas yra naudojamos Lietuvos muziejuose, ką žydų gelbėjimo tema muziejus nori pranešti visuomenei, kokiomis priemonėmis kuria muziejinį istorinį pasakojimą, kokie istorinės kultūros įvykiai skatina žydų gelbėjimo temų viename ar kitame Lietuvos muziejuje atsiradimą? Atsakymams į šiuos klausimus pasitelkiama keturių atvejų (Vilniaus Gaono žydų istorijos muziejaus, „Sugiharos namų“ Kaune, Kauno IX forto, Šeduvoje kuriamo muziejaus „Dingęs Štetlas“) analizė. Ji atskleidė, kad žydų gelbėjimo tema siekiama pateikti kuo objektyvesnį, visa aprėpiantį šios praeities vaizdinį ir pasitelkus jį atlikti kelias svarbias funkcijas. Tai Lietuvos ir užsienio lankytojų edukavimas (muziejus kaip pažinimo erdvė), žydų gelbėtojų pagerbimas, prisiminimas, padėka jiems (muziejus kaip memorialinė erdvė), su žydų gelbėjimu susijusių stereotipų paneigimas (muziejus kaip demitifikacijos erdvė).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: žydų gelbėjimas, Antrasis pasaulinis karas, Holokaustas, Lietuvos muziejai, ekspozicija.

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Introduction

Lithuanian historiography shows that the topic of rescuing the Jews in Lithuania during World War II (WWII) is intertwined into different narrative schemes: the pre-Holocaust story of the rescue of Jewish refugees at the beginning of WWII and the topic of the Holocaust in Lithuania.¹ When fixing a certain dynamic in Lithuanian historiography, it is important to go deeper into the role of the museum, an institution closely connected with scientific research, in these processes. On the one hand, museums are power structures. Their power lies in the ability to represent the present and the past, and through that to shape, control, and consolidate a certain image. But on the other hand, museums are a source for understanding our own society, its historical imagination. According to the famous Dutch museologist Peter van Mensch,

<...> the core of museological theory – the past is what we perceive as the past. It is a construction of the past that may be very far from what the past actually was.²

In the search for a solution to the raised problem, the category of *historical culture* is important, in which the problems of relationships between identity schemes, the contents of historical memory, narrative trajectories, and representations of the past are interwoven. Lithuanian sociologist Zenonas Norkus defines historical culture as the totality of forms of representation of the historical past.³ The theme of rescuing the Jews appears in various forms of historical culture: memoirs, scientific and artistic books, and also in museums after WWII. These are mostly Holocaust museums, which are often considered centers of education and research. Therefore, when looking at Lithuanian museums as a form of historical culture, the following questions are raised: what narrative schemes of Jewish rescue are used in museums, what does the museum want to communicate to the public on the topic of Jewish rescue, what means do they use to create a museum historical narrative, what historical cultural events promote the emergence of the themes of Jewish rescue in one or another Lithuanian museum? The purpose of this article is to reveal the practices of creating the narrative of the rescue of the Jews in Lithuania during WWII in Lithuanian museums by interpreting the Lithuanian museum as one of the form of historical culture. It should be noted that the topic of rescuing the Jews is often an integral part of the museum narrative about the Holocaust in Lithuania. This can be seen in more than one Lithuanian museum exhibition. Therefore, in this study, we will focus on the most prominent current and future examples of Lithuanian museology, conveying the theme of rescuing the Jews in Lithuania. These are the exhibition of Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shohah’ (operating since 2009), ‘Sugihara House’ exhibition in Kaunas ‘Visas for Life’ (operating since 2001), ‘Casablanca of the North: Kaunas 1939–1940’ (opened in 2017), ‘Kindness Crystal’ (established in 2020), The Ninth Fort of Kaunas exhibitions related to

¹ For example, see Išgelbėję pasaulį... Žydų gelbėjimas Lietuvoje, 2001; S. Strelcovas, 2018.

² P. van Mensch, 2014, p. 23.

³ Z. Norkus, 2005a, p. 81. See also Z. Norkus, 2005b.

the rescue of Jews: ‘Lithuanians – saviors of the Jews’ (renovated in 2010), ‘Diplomats of Hope’ (operating from 2021), the exhibition concept of the future museum in Šeduva ‘Lost Shtetl’. The study is based on *in situ* analysis of the listed working exhibitions. However, the most important source of this research are interviews and questionnaires answered by museum curators and/or administration representatives of the mentioned museums. Only from these sources was it possible to obtain fairly reliable information about the circumstances, behind-the-scenes and challenges of the creation of museums and exhibitions, the search for exhibition materials, the message to be conveyed, and the reactions of visitors.⁴ It is the revealing of the ‘behind-the-scenes’ creation of museum narratives through the theory of historical culture that makes this article original.

The article consists of five parts. The first, theoretical part is dedicated to revealing the connections between historical culture and the museum. Other parts discuss the specific practices of creating the narrative of the rescue of the Jews in Lithuanian museums: the exhibition of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah’ (Part 2), the exhibitions of ‘Sugihara’s House’ (Part 3), the exhibitions related to the rescue of the Jews of The Ninth Fort of Kaunas (Part 4), presentation of the topic of rescuing the Jews in the museum currently under construction ‘The Lost Shtetl’ (Part 5).

1. Museum as a form of historical culture

According to the historical theorist Jörn Rüsen, the category of historical culture describes various forms, areas, and strategies of the manifestation of historical memory. The different domains and strategies of scientific research, artistic representation, struggle for political power, school and extra-school education, heritage conservation, museums and other public historical memories (despite their differences) are seen as manifestations of a common relationship with the past that aims to solve problems of orientation in time.⁵ It can be the formation or confirmation of identity, liberation from imposed patterns of behavior and self-definition, search for new identity schemes.⁶ For example, Hans Jürgen Pandel talks about historical culture as event culture (German: *Eventkultur*). Historical culture lives in events that are happening here and now, things that are being argued about today, movies that are being discussed today.⁷ Therefore, the historical culture is derived from the need of societies to understand the present and the future through the interpretation of the past.

A museum (like any other form of historical culture) originates from the need inherent in humans and societies to orient themselves in time, to have a certain orientation matrix that allows them to live meaningfully. According to historian Arthur Marwick,

⁴ The author of the article sincerely thanks the administration representatives of the listed museums and museum workers who participated in this research. The research material is stored in the author’s personal archive.

⁵ For more information on historical culture, see J. Rüsen, 2007a.

⁶ These different needs for history and strategies for satisfying them are described by J. Rüsen’s division of historical narrative into traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic types. See J. Rüsen, 2007b.

⁷ See H.-J. Pandel, 2013, S. 169–171.

society in general has a need for history, while sophisticated societies have a need to have many stories.⁸ In order to satisfy this need, according to the British museologist Gaynor Kavanagh, they accumulate ‘garbage’ and remains of human activities and experiences. It becomes a means of reconstructing the past in such a way that it makes sense in the present. Since there is no such thing as comprehensive memory, ‘pure’ knowledge of the past, there must be people (priests, chants, historians, archivists, collectors, museums, etc.) and institutions that deal with it. However, people’s needs for history are different, and this leads to different stories in the museums and their different roles.⁹ It is true though, that the German museologist Friedrich Waidacher connects the accumulation and storage of things with another universal human need – the desire to give a certain transcendence to the transience of life, to resist oblivion and decay by preserving social memory.¹⁰ Therefore, the museum should be considered an institutionalized form of social memory storage and dissemination. The nature of the museum as an institution guarantees good organization, professionalism, continuity of its activities and the cultural, not the communicative nature of memory (Jan Assmann’s concept).

According to G. Kavanagh, museums usually reveal the stories prevailing in a certain space and in a certain period. Therefore the stories presented in museums are neither ‘pure’ nor innocent. They are created using prevailing thought schemes, dominant ideologies, our beliefs about ourselves and the world around us.¹¹ As stated by the aforementioned P. van Mensch, ‘museums are not about others, museums are about ourselves.’¹² Therefore, it is no coincidence that the museum as a form of historical culture can be a space for the idealization, mystification, and dissemination of nostalgia of the past, or a place for demythification, a critical, more objective approach. The emergence of museums is driven by changes in the historical culture. Especially various anniversaries encourage the increase in the number and variety of museums. On the other hand, a museum interest in certain topics is stimulated by actualized stories in certain media (TV, radio, cinema, historical publications, etc.) – museums adapt similar topics in their spaces or can look at them from a critical perspective. The entire network of historical culture forms, institutions, and strategies creates a relatively informed and receptive to diverse things ‘user’ of historical culture.¹³

At first glance, it may seem that the museum as a form of historical culture is not distinguished by anything. However, this is not the case. The museum as a form of representation of the past is unique because, unlike historiography, historical cinema, history textbook or historical drama, it communicates and interprets the past through museum exhibits. Therefore, we have to agree with G. Kavanagh, who claims that the museum as a way of representing the past cannot be replaced by anyone.¹⁴ Hence, a necessary

⁸ Based on G. Kavanagh, 1990, p. 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ F. Waidacher, 2007, p. 54.

¹¹ See G. Kavanagh, 1990, p. 5; G. Kavanagh, 1999, p. xiii.

¹² P. van Mensch, 2014, p. 23.

¹³ See more G. Kavanagh, 1990, p. 7–10.

¹⁴ G. Kavanagh, 1990, p. 54.

condition for museum historical narratives is the availability of museum collections, the selection of which gives birth to a certain form of representation of the past – exhibition, educational program, etc.

Looking at the Lithuanian museums as institutions of historical culture and searching for the theme of rescuing the Jews during WWII in it, the question arises: what historical cultural events promote the emergence of this theme in one or another Lithuanian museum, what does the museum want to communicate to the public on the topic of rescuing the Jews, what strategies for forming historical consciousness it uses and what means does it have to create a museum narrative?

2. The exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah’ – ‘absolutely authentic stories from the first person’

After the closure of the Jewish Museum dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust in Vilnius in 1949,¹⁵ the museum representation of Jewish history in Lithuania ceased for almost four decades. As the first manifestation of the museum representation of the Lithuanian Jewish culture and history, the exhibition ‘Jewish Art in Lithuania in 18th–20th centuries’ can be considered, which was opened in M. Žilinskas Gallery in Kaunas in 1988 and transferred to Vilnius after a couple of months.¹⁶ Another important step was the establishment of the Vilna Jews Museum in Vilnius in 1989 (now the museum is called Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, further in the article – Gaon Museum). It is precisely the name of this restored institution that most of the museum interpretation and communication activities of the Jewish heritage at the beginning of independence should be associated with. And this is a sure thing, since the purpose of the museum is exclusively focused on the Jewish culture and history, i.e. to collect, preserve, research, restore, exhibit Lithuanian Jewish heritage, traditional and contemporary Jewish art, documents and objects related to the Holocaust.¹⁷ One of the priority areas of this museum is

<...> to reveal the stories of saved Jews to the general public and perpetuate the memory of Lithuanian people who saved Jews during the war.¹⁸

According to Danutė Selčinskaja, the curator of this museum, from the beginning the museum has started collecting data on saved Lithuanian Jews and Jewish saviors.¹⁹ The topic of rescuing the Jews became an integral part of the exhibitions devoted to Jewish history: ‘Holocaust exhibition,’ ‘Jewish life in Lithuania.’ However, according to D. Selčinskaja, the greatest push for the increase of the material related to the rescue of the Jews was given by the writer Icchokas Meras living in Israel, who himself was saved from the Nazis. In 2004, this writer appealed through various media

¹⁵ See more N. Latvytė-Gustaitienė, 2018.

¹⁶ Lietuvos žydų dailė, 1988.

¹⁷ Apie muziejų. Vilniaus Gaono žydų istorijos muziejus.

¹⁸ Projektas „Išsigelbėjęs žydų vaikas pasakoja apie Šoa“.

¹⁹ Interview with D. Selčinskaja, 2022.

to Israeli and Lithuanian societies to find as many people as possible, who survived in Lithuania and encourage them to write their stories and send them to Yad Vashem, as well as the Gaon Museum (if they had not done it before).²⁰ This, according to H.-J. Pandel, historical cultural event led to the emergence of a huge archive of material related to the rescue of the Jews in the Gaon Museum and the birth of a new exhibition idea:

<...> we began to correspond very actively, many contacts were made, although there were some before, but it was a very big impulse and people sent a lot of visual material, told a lot about their family, sent pre-war photographs, when everyone was still happy and if there were already older children, they could remember, because they lived through the war. We received a lot of beautiful visual material through those personal contacts and somehow it was necessary to use it. We wanted it also to be accessible to museum visitors.²¹

For the theme of the rescue of the Jews, the Gaon Museum chose *the principle of personalization* (i.e. telling history through personal stories), which is very common in Holocaust museums. According to Edward T. Linenthal, reviewer of the permanent exhibition of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the personalization of history aims to deny the mass and at the same time the anonymity of the killing machine during the Holocaust.²² According to D. Selčinskaja, the curator of the exhibition ‘A Jewish child who survived tells about the Shoah,’ the principle of personalization was chosen in the Gaon Museum in order to make it easier for visitors to understand this painful topic. We can add that the principle of personalization of history, which rejects the concept of impersonal history, history as just structures and processes, is also described as the principle of *closeness of history (to a person)*.²³ Hence, the principle of personalization of the story creates conditions for the addressees of the story to identify with the visible characters, to recognize themselves in them, to adopt the values declared by them.

The preparatory work for the exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah’ took five years.²⁴ It was opened in 2009, i.e. five years after the aforementioned initiative by I. Meras. During that time, according to D. Selčinskaja, about 3 thousand photographs, ‘endless hours of text and video recordings’ were collected. The material for the exhibition comes from the survivors (some of whom are no longer alive), and it is mostly memories. Only a small amount of archival material related to the rescue was found because,

<...> there are not many such things in the archives – rescue is a complete conspiracy, complete secrecy, and you had to be careful not only of strangers, but also of neighbors.²⁵

²⁰ Yad Vashem is the Institute of National Remembrance in Israel, founded in 1953 which studies the Holocaust. It has a commission that awards the title of Righteous among the Nations.

²¹ Interview with D. Selčinskaja, 2022.

²² E. T. Linenthal, 1994, p. 410.

²³ For example, see G. Knopp, 1988, S. 7–8.

²⁴ Project executors: Danutė Selčinskaja, Daiva Osipovaitė, Renata Titovienė, Ana Bogatyriova ir Rūta Kaplinskaja.

²⁵ Interview with D. Selčinskaja, 2022.

The display of scanned photographs (next to personal stories) is considered by the exhibition curator to be one of the biggest advantages of this exhibition. The photos not only personalize the story, but present aspects of everyday Jewish life before the Holocaust:

Historians themselves (for example Bubnys) were surprised [when seeing the exhibition – R. Š.]: – How many photographs, how many photographs! Because they write about it, but did not see it. And now you see those people. That is why, we tried to show what families were like, how they lived.²⁶

With so much material, the problem arose concerning its museum representation. The curator D. Selčinskaja, who happened to see the memorial museum of Salomėja Nėris in Kaunas, Palemonas, was amazed by the work of the creators of its exhibition – the company ‘Terra media’ – and invited it to cooperate with the Gaon Museum. The main axis of this exhibition is the stories of the survivors, whose memories were written by persons who were children during the Holocaust. Therefore, in the words of D. Selčinskaja, these are ‘absolutely authentic stories from the first person.’ There are 48 stands in warm wood color for the rescued children in the exhibition, and 20 luminous stands are dedicated to the most prominent Jewish saviors, although the children’s stands also tell about their saviors. On the stands we see photographs, text, sometimes videos. Since the rescue is inseparable from the course of the Holocaust itself, there are also several cold concrete stands dedicated to the historical context: the history of the establishment and liquidation of the ghettos. Places in the exhibition are also given to the rescuers of the Jews killed by the Nazis. The stands are placed along the broken paths, so that

the visitor feels at least a fraction of what the people who were hiding and persecuted had to go through – tension and fear <...>.²⁷

There is also a visitor’s room and an interactive memorial dedicated to the memory of murdered Jewish children. It is created from a series of photographs of children killed in the Holocaust staring back at us. At the same time, it is a kind of Jewish cemetery, where you have to put down a stone to hear the lullaby ‘Shtiler, Shtiler.’²⁸ This memorial room can be considered a kind of quintessence of the exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah,’ because

We are dedicating this exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child’ to the murdered Jewish children, because most of them were killed and a very small part was saved thanks to these special people who decided to sacrifice and risk everything.²⁹

We have to agree with the curator’s observation regarding two shortcomings of this exhibition. The first is the smallness of the room where the exhibition is set up. Thus, as in many Lithuanian museums, which are located in buildings not built spe-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Projektas „Išsigelbėjęs žydu vaikas pasakoja apie Šoa“.

²⁸ Lyrics: Shmerke Kaczerginski, melody: Alexander Volkoviski.

²⁹ Interview with D. Selčinskaja, 2022.

cifically for museum function, in the case of the Gaon Museum, ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah,’ the space was one of the ‘tyrants’ that determined not quite suitable exhibition decisions, a certain ‘pressure of the walls’ feeling. Another ‘tyrant’ of the formation of this exhibition is the abundance of material (especially textual), which can hardly be absorbed by the visitor during the one-hour exhibition viewing time traditionally characteristic for visitors.³⁰ The excess of material was caused not only by the curators’ desire to present as much material as possible about ‘how it really was.’ Other factors: the wishes of the rememberers themselves and consideration of the requirements for foreign visitors:

<...> we still had that problem – since every survivor wrote his own story, they really wanted everything to fit in there, therefore nothing could be shortened. This caused major problems. Then it was necessary to do the translation.³¹

However, in the case of this exhibition, the saying applies ‘every cloud has a silver lining.’ The exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah’ with rich visual and textual material became the basis for the database. ‘We realized that no one here will read our long stories and it is necessary to publish them on the Internet,’ says the curator of the exhibition. This is how the virtual exhibition www.issigelsbejėsvaikas.lt came into being in 2011, which is still supplemented with photographs of the children who died. In addition, a mobile exhibition of the same name appeared. It is the exhibition which travels most widely throughout Lithuania compared to other exhibitions of the Gaon Museum.

Nevertheless, D. Selčinskaja, while agreeing that it is necessary to talk about the Jewish rescuers who sacrificed themselves in brutal conditions, believes that the topic of rescue should not overshadow, or perhaps even deny, the problem of the death of the victims. According to her, the inadequate raising of the topic of rescue and belittling the problem of killing sometimes leads to the ‘silence’ of rescued people:

When people in Lithuania want to talk only about the rescuers, they really have a hard time talking about the victims, and they don’t want to admit that some crimes are obvious. Now that situation is getting better, a lot better, but still. Therefore, it is difficult for the saved to remember and difficult to speak, and therefore, when they see an inadequate reaction, they become completely silent. This is a very sensitive topic.³²

3. ‘Sugihara House’ – ‘this is probably a unique case in Lithuania’

The establishment history of ‘Sugihara House’ (under the authority of Sugihara’s foundation ‘Diplomats for Life’ established in 1999) is somewhat different from that of the Gaon Museum, which has the status of a state museum. According to Ramūnas Janulaitis, the current director of ‘Sugihara House,’ the history of their establishment

³⁰ See more about the behavior of visitors in the exhibition space: D. Herles, 1996; R. Šermukšnytė, 2008.

³¹ Interview with D. Selčinskaja, 2022.

³² Ibid.

is ‘probably a unique case in Lithuania.’³³ The uniqueness, according to him, lies in the fact that in the 90s, i.e. during the ‘gloomy’ years of wild capitalism in Lithuania, three people decided to spread the word about an unknown person in Lithuania. This is the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara (1900–1986), the savior of the Jews who fled to Lithuania from Poland at the beginning of WWII:

*The founders of the foundation were three persons: Ramūnas Garbaravičius, a businessman and politician at the time, Egidijus Aleksandravičius, a historian, and Belgian businessman Freddy Opsomer. In fact, the whole story started with him, who came to Kaunas in the mid-90s to establish a free economic zone. Sugihara’s youngest son was one of his good friends. When he came to Kaunas, he knew the story about Sugihara and knew the place where he lived, where the consulate was situated. And he tried to establish a sort of museum here through government institutions. It was late 90s – <...> nobody here cared about those things. Since no one cared, nothing was done. Then he started looking for people who would have the idea, so to speak, to create such a private museum. That’s where it all started. The three friends decided to establish a fund in order to establish a museum. The beginning was also financially difficult – our main income comes from visitors. The beginning was poor in terms of the number of visitors, because not many people from Kaunas knew that museum. And then those Japanese from abroad started coming here to Lithuania in groups or as individual visitors.*³⁴

Consequently, the audience of the museum had to be not only Lithuanians, but also foreign (primarily Japanese) visitors. The latter had more knowledge about this savior of the Jews. According to historian Linas Venclauskas, museum curator of ‘Sugihara House,’ Sugihara became known in the late sixties as a savior of the Jews who issued so-called visas for life.³⁵ In 1985 the state of Israel awarded him the title of Righteous Among the Nations, and the knowledge of Sugihara in Japan begins around the 90s, when Sugihara’s widow wrote her memoirs ‘Visas for Life.’³⁶ Therefore, we can say that the establishment of the museum in Kaunas was motivated by a certain cult of Sugihara as a hero of recent times in Japan (and not only), a desire to know the places of memory in Lithuania of this outstanding personality. On the other hand, the director of ‘Sugihara House’ R. Janulaitis and the museum’s curator L. Venclauskas are convinced that this museum should be considered as one of the factors of Sugihara’s popularity in present-day Lithuania. Therefore, the case of ‘Sugihara House’ shows that museums are not only affected by the realities and actualities of historical culture (in this case, foreign), but also can be considered as an active actor of historical culture, enriching the historical consciousness of local visitors.

The memorial museum exhibition ‘Visas for Life’ dedicated to Sugihara was established two years after the establishment of the foundation, i.e. in 2001. It was established in a house representing interwar (1918–1940) Kaunas modernism, where in 1939–1940 the Japanese consulate was operating. In contrast to the creation of the Gaon Museum

³³ Interview with R. Janulaitis, 2022.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Interview with Dr. L. Venclauskas, 2022.

³⁶ Y. Sugihara, 1995.

exhibition ‘Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah,’ where there was an extremely large amount of material available, the newly established Sugihara Foundation ‘Diplomats for Life’ had almost no exhibition material. As the museum curator Lolita Jablonskienė aptly expressed, <...> ‘no matter what ideas you have <...>, if you don’t have the necessary artifacts, you won’t go far.’³⁷ An interview with R. Janulaitis, the director of ‘Sugihara House,’ reveals the complex search for exhibition material and the motives for searching for certain exhibits:

There are no exhibits. There were a few photos from this era here in Kaunas, very few, like six or seven. Of course, there was cooperation with the Yad Vashem organization and with the Holocaust Museum in New York and an attempt was made, I think, to correspond with Sugihara’s descendants in order to have some information. We collected some of those photos and the rescued people were contacted thanks to our historians who tried to find contacts. <...> We enlarged those photos, their digital copies, [made – R. Š.] a paper version and hung all that information with explanations on the wall. And we needed some furniture. As far as I can remember, we were able to borrow a writing table from that era, interwar period, from the War Museum or from Čiurlionis Museum funds. An interwar table, an interwar chair, an armchair, some kind of bookcase were found by my former colleague the late Simonas Dovydavičius, through antique collectors. In a word, we worked as much as we could – a desk lamp, a chandelier, a typewriter from that era. Everything was collected from some places that had nothing to do with Sugihara, because, you see, he took everything away, there was nothing left. What we see in the two halls is the authenticity of the interwar period, but not the authenticity of the family. <...> We had such a goal to show our visitors, especially the Japanese, what the interior of that time looked like – primarily furniture, a chandelier, a telephone, a desk lamp, a typewriter, a bookshelf. These are the things that make the visitors feel a little bit of atmosphere of how it was in those days.³⁸

The first exhibition of ‘Visas for Life,’ according to the staff of ‘Sugihara House,’ practically remained unchanged to this day. There are rooms imitating Japanese Consulate from 1939–1940, where you can touch the furniture and feel the visa for life on display, which is especially popular among Japanese tourists. The story of Sugihara and his family is also revealed here. In this exhibition, there was also a space for the Dutch consul Jan Zwartendijk (1896–1976), who collaborated with Sugihara, and for his and Sugihara’s joint activities in Kaunas in the summer of 1940, there are also the stories of the persons they saved. As R. Janulaitis, the director of ‘Sugihara House,’ admits, that revealing this tandem in one room causes some confusion of understanding for some visitors:

At first both Sugihara and Zwartendijk were squeezed into one office. If the Dutch came, it would be strange to them why the two persons [provided – R. Š.] are in one room. It was also strange for the Japanese: – this is Sugihara Museum. Why is Zwartendijk here too? Now we will set up another room to separate Dutch Consul Zwartendijk and appreciate his heroic deed.³⁹

³⁷ Apie tikrovės ribas ir dailės santykį su ideologija, 2010, p. 36.

³⁸ Interview with R. Janulaitis, 2022.

³⁹ Ibid.

In ‘Sugihara House,’ in 2017, a new stand-up exhibition appeared along the walls, ‘Casablanca of the North: Kaunas in 1939–1940.’⁴⁰ According to L. Venclauskas, one of the curators of the exhibition, it aimed to reveal the unique Lithuanian context in which Sugihara worked:

*Because if we look at Sugihara’s historiography in foreign languages, it seems that Sugihara was here, did his heroic deed, left as if there was no context, as if there was no situation in Lithuania. Now we can confidently say that Sugihara and Zwartendijk saved those people who were firstly saved by Lithuania. Because if, when the World War II started in September 1939, Lithuania had behaved like most European states: controlling, maintaining quotas, not admitting refugees – Sugihara and Zwartendijk would not have much to save. This exhibition is dedicated to this issue.*⁴¹

Therefore, next to the activities of Sugihara and Zwartendijk, this exhibition focuses on the Lithuanian realities of 1939–1940 which, at least in the context of the Lithuanian museum culture, present a unique image of Lithuania of this period. In the information presented in abundance on the stands, Lithuania is presented as a respectable political figure who fought for humanity until the last breath of independence:

*Because we often meet the Soviet occupation with lowered heads, saying: that’s it, nothing good happened, we were trampled, we were forced on our knees, we lost everything. Well, that is true, but thanks to this exhibition [we show – R. Š.], that until the last moment, until a more powerful force trampled Lithuania, Lithuania stood firm, fulfilling all its duties both in diplomatic negotiations and in foreign missions rescuing those refugees, by providing more visas. The desire to show that Lithuania was honorable until the end, self-respecting state, a society that held on and was not fatalistically accepting fate, doing nothing, with drooping hands and bowed heads.*⁴²

A multifaceted and metaphorical image Casablanca of the North was proposed by one of the founders of the Sugihara foundation ‘Diplomats for Life,’ professor of history Egidijus Aleksandravičius.⁴³ According to L. Venclauskas, the curator of the exhibition, the inspiration came from popular culture – the Hollywood film ‘Casablanca’ of 1942 (dir. Michael Curtiz). According to him, the plot lines of the film (refugees, uncertainty, espionage, opportunities to escape, a love story between two people, the search for help) recall the situation in Kaunas in 1940:

In this case, in Kaunas, refugees and uncertainty, and looking for opportunities to escape, and espionage (because Sugihara was sent primarily for intelligence purposes). And that love

⁴⁰ Curators: Linas Venclauskas, Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė.

⁴¹ Interview with Dr. L. Venclauskas, 2022.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See L. Venclauskas, 2018, p. 6. By the way, an international conference was held in Kaunas in May 2016 with the name almost identical to the exhibition – ‘Casablanca of the North: Refugees and Rescuers in Kaunas 1939–1940’ (<https://www.vdu.lt/en/casablanca-of-the-north-refugees-rescuers-in-kaunas/>). This shows that the concept of Lithuania in 1939–1940 as the Casablanca of the North was discussed in a certain environment for many years. A collection of articles published on the basis of this conference: Casablanca of the North, 2017.

story in the movie is always a big question, why did Sugihara take up that activity? It is difficult to answer, as in the case of every Jewish savior: why did you do it, why did the others did not? One of those answers – Sugihara was tolerant, open to the world, saw that life should be enjoyed, life should be celebrated, life cannot be somehow limited, closed, segmented according to some standards.⁴⁴

On the other hand, as the curator of the exhibition admits, through the motif of Casablanca, which is more recognizable abroad than in Lithuania, it was hoped to attract the attention of foreigners, to bring Kaunas (and at the same time Lithuania) closer to the perception of foreign visitors. We could answer the question whether these goals were achieved only after conducting empirical research on visitors. However, even in absence of empirical research, the same shortcomings and barriers to visitors' perception are visible, as in the case of the exhibition 'Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about Shoah.' It is the smallness of the premises, where the contextual exhibition of 'Sugihara House' is located, and the abundance of information. Another possible barrier to visitors' perception is an excessively traditional exhibition, where abundant visual and textual information is presented in stands placed along the walls. Based on the classification of museum narratives presented by heritage communication specialist Rimvydas Laužikas, we can name such an exhibition as positivist.⁴⁵ Here, the news is communicated 'neutrally' (although caricatures of political figures, picturesque names of the stands also provide a certain emotional charge), factually, chronologically. A historical fact is an end in itself, the exhibition aims to communicate as many 'objective' facts as possible. Exhibitions 'Casablanca of the North: Kaunas 1939–1940' curator agrees that the exhibition should have 'more of that interaction, that liveliness, understanding that the younger generation is already using another language.' However, L. Venclauskas explains the choice of classical type of exhibition by the museum vision of the board members of the 'Diplomats for Life' foundation:

The rule is that if you come here, to Sugihara house, you are primarily driven by a certain desire to know, a desire to delve into certain discursive, thematic, polemical aspects. Because our attitude is to look for and raise uncomfortable questions and try to find answers to such not very comfortable questions. This is the place where you come to find out, to go deeper, to reveal. In addition, several films were made on the subject of Sugihara for 15–20 minutes, we show those films, followed by the exhibition. So, it's not just a 'dry walk.' But the basis is classical exhibitions.⁴⁶

These thoughts show that the creators of 'Sugihara House' see the museum as a cognitive space, where all the symbols must lead the visitor to knowledge and education.⁴⁷ According to the director of this museum, there are various visitors. Some come just to look around or to pass the time. Others come with a certain educational intention – 'they know the story of that person or some event and they read every stand in detail.'

⁴⁴ Interview with Dr. L. Venclauskas, 2022.

⁴⁵ More about the positivist museum narrative: R. Šermukšnytė, et al., 2019, p. 102–103.

⁴⁶ Interview with Dr. L. Venclauskas, 2022.

⁴⁷ For more information on levels of visitors interaction with the exhibition, see R. Šermukšnytė, 2008, p. 15.

The latest exhibition of ‘Sugihara House’ – ‘Kindness Crystal’ (2020) – is based on a similar concept.⁴⁸ It focuses on Lithuanians who were saving the Jews from the Holocaust and were killed as a result. It is a kind of one object exhibition. It was inspired by one postcard sent from Japan, signed by yet unidentified Juzef. The curators of the exhibition assume that he may have been the person who received Sugihara’s visa and ended up in Japan. The postcard was addressed to rescuer Vytautas Žakavičius (1876–1944). He is the Righteous Among the Nations, who organized a Jewish rescue network in Gelgaudiškis (Šakiai region), for which he was punished and shot in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas in 1944.

However, this topic of rescuing the Jews from the Nazis is a bit far from the main specialization of the museum – the presentation of rescuing the Jews from the Soviets. Therefore, the curators and the entire board of the foundation faced the problem of integrating museum narratives. According to L. Venclauskas, it is solved by the search for two connections. The first is that both Sugihara and Zwartendijk and Žakavičius are connected by an individual decision to save the Jews:

This was our inspiration to connect those two stories: Sugihara, who saved the Jews not from the Nazis, but from the Soviets, and Žakavičius, who saved the Jews from the Nazis. There is a certain connection here through individual efforts. Because what are we trying to say through exhibitions? That everyone’s individual decision is meaningful and important, that your personal decision and position can save people’s lives.⁴⁹

On the other hand, as L. Venclauskas admits, the stories of Sugihara and Žakavičius are also connected by a religious motive:

That postcard connected Žakavičius, who was religious, with Sugihara and Zwartendijk, who rescued religious Jews. For us, that religious moment of faith and trust was the anchor that could connect us to a coherent expository narrative.⁵⁰

However, the story of V. Žakavičius is only one of the several in the ‘Crystal of Kindness’ exhibition. In cooperation with the above-mentioned exhibition curator D. Selčinskaja, the curators of ‘Kindness Crystal’ received data that there are about 30 people with the same fate who received the death penalty for rescuing the Jews. From these 30 stories, they chose only a few because, on the one hand, due to the smallness of the premises, there was no place to exhibit all the stories, and on the other hand, a considerable part of that material is exhibited in the Gaon Museum. As L. Venclauskas expressed, ‘we neither want to adopt it nor duplicate it in our exhibitions.’ For the exhibition of these stories, the method was again chosen of exhibiting stands along the walls, where we see text and scanned images. An exception and essential highlight of such an exhibition is the highlighted authentic postcard of Juzef to Žakavičius.

L. Venclauskas, speaking both about the exhibition ‘Casablanca of the North: Kaunas 1939–1940,’ and about the ‘Kindness Crystal’ exhibition, admits that a lot of new

⁴⁸ Curators of this exhibition: Linas Venclauskas, Martynas Butkus.

⁴⁹ Interview with Dr. L. Venclauskas, 2022.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

information was learned and presented during the creation of the exhibitions. In particular, a lot of it was provided both by the aforementioned Gaon Museum and by Simonas Strelcovas and Gintautas Surgailis, who did a considerable work in this field. However, on the other hand, the curator states that ‘in principle, everything seems quite clear, but when you start to dig deeper, new layers appear in this place. You can still search and discover.’

4. The theme of rescuing the Jews in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas – ‘such exhibitions are necessary’

The beginning of the history of the Ninth Fort Museum dates back to the Soviet era, when in 1958 the resolution ‘On the organization of the revolution history museum in Kaunas, on the territory of the Ninth Fort’ was adopted. One of the aspirations of this museum (opened in 1959) is ‘to perpetuate the memory of the terrorist acts of Lithuanian bourgeois nationalists and German fascist occupiers.’⁵¹ However, according to Modestas Kuodys, the Holocaust was completely distorted in the Soviet propaganda scheme by calling it the ‘massacre of Soviet citizens’ and omitting the fact that those citizens were Jews, killed not because of their political views, but because of their nationality.⁵² It should be noted that the theme of the Holocaust occupied only a certain part of the exhibition structure of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas during the Soviet era, next to the 1918–1919 exhibition ‘revolutionary events’ in Lithuania, Vincas Kapsukas government activities, communist underground activities in 1920–1940, ‘Great Patriotic War’ and other propaganda topics. During the Revival period (1988–1989), the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, like other Lithuanian historical cultural institutions, undertook the task of revising Soviet history and filling in ‘white spots.’ Next to the topics of deportations, repressions, and resistance, the topic of the Holocaust was also newly evaluated:

*Weaving this information <...> into the idealistic-heroic image of Lithuanian history was not (and cannot be) easy, but that process nevertheless began in the public space and partly in the collective consciousness at that time. The Ninth Fort of Kaunas Museum finds itself precisely in the vanguard of those state cultural institutions that encouraged and supported such complex and painful efforts in every possible way.*⁵³

The topic of rescuing the Jews in Lithuania is just one of many other topics exhibited in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas. The periods of Kaunas Fortress (1879–1918), the Kaunas Hard Labor Prison (1924–1940), the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, and the Soviet occupation are presented here. Therefore, the topic of rescuing the Jews in Lithuania is presented in a broad context. The first exhibition devoted to the topic of rescuing the Jews was installed in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas as far back as 1993. It was intend-

⁵¹ IX fortas, 2021, p. 129.

⁵² Ibid., p. 129.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 155.

ed to honor the Lithuanian Righteous Among the Nations.⁵⁴ This exhibition was redone in 2010 after adding other topics and acquired the name ‘Lithuanians – saviors of Jews.’⁵⁵ The exhibition presents several dozen stories of the rescue of the Jews with the help stands placed along the wall. According to Vytautas Petrikėnas, museum curator of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, head of the History Department, the topic of rescuing the Jews is closely related to one of the main missions of the Ninth Fort Museum – to educate the public about the Holocaust and prevent anti-Semitism by means of conveying historical content through exhibitions, education, lectures and other means. Therefore, according to him, there is particularly great need for such an exhibition for the museum. At first the exhibition used mostly iconographic material collected by the museum staff from archives and personal collections. After the active work of almost twenty museum workers in collecting exhibits on the topic of Jewish rescuers from relatives of the rescuers, a completely new exhibition was presented to the visitors.

The question is: what makes this exhibition stand out? In the case of the Ninth Fort exhibition ‘Lithuanians – Jewish saviors,’ unlike the case of the recent exhibitions discussed in ‘Sugihara House,’ the focus was more on the museum as a way of honoring, remembering, thanking for hope, i.e. a memorial space:

When creating the exhibition, the aim was not to surprise the visitor and present material that has not been published anywhere. The main goal is to draw the public’s attention and honor the Lithuanians who, risking their lives and the lives of their loved ones, were saving the lives of innocent people. In my opinion, the most difficult thing for the exhibition creators was to select which rescuers’ stories to reveal to the visitors.⁵⁶

We have to agree with V. Petrikėnas that the exhibition created more than a decade ago already ‘does not meet the aesthetic expectations of the majority of visitors and the trends of modern museology.’ According to him, the museum intends to create a completely new exhibition ‘Lithuanians – Jewish saviors’ in near future. According to him, the concept of the exhibition has not yet been decided, but one thing is clear – the technical execution and design will change. Compared to the design of the ‘Sugihara House’ exhibitions, the exhibition ‘Lithuanians – Jewish rescuers’ is very similar. We see the same stands with visual and textual information placed along the wall of one cell. The most prominent and therefore the most memorable exhibits of this Ninth Fort exhibition are the medals of the Righteous Among the Nations and the ‘Life Saviour’s Cross Awards.’ However, the *genius loci* of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, a former fortress, later a prison, concentration camp, give this exhibition (as well as all other exhibitions of this museum) a certain additional emotional charge.⁵⁷ After all, forts, historical hous-

⁵⁴ Information from V. Petrikėnas, 2022.

⁵⁵ The curator is Julija Menciūnienė, a long-time museologist of the museum.

⁵⁶ Information from V. Petrikėnas, 2022.

⁵⁷ For more information on the relationship between the museum and *genius loci*, see R. Šermukšnytė, 2014.

es, memorial museums are special because they give meaning to events and personalities in the places of their existence or events in their lives. Exposing an authentic environment is one of the most important functions of such museums.

There is another exhibition dedicated to the topic of rescuing the Jews in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas. This is an exhibition that commemorates C. Sugihara's and J. Zwartendijk's heroic deed. According to V. Petrikėnas, 'the first exhibition of such a theme was established in 1998 and updated in 2006. And in 2021 a completely new exhibition 'Diplomats of Hope' was presented to the public.'⁵⁸ The appearance of this theme in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas is associated with the fact that in the late 1990s, the museum received more and more individual visitors and organized tourist groups from Japan. Also, the Ninth Fort Museum wanted to present a story about the rescue of the Jews in Kaunas in general as coherent as possible. During the creation of the second exhibition, the duplication with 'Sugihara House' was not noticed:

The building of Ninth Fort has a completely different emotional charge than the 'Sugihara House.' The location is directly related to the Holocaust, so the exhibition about the survivors gives visitors hope in the overall story of the unfathomable atrocities of the Second World War.⁵⁹

The Ninth Fort of Kaunas also did not rely on the collected material of 'Sugihara House,' but looked for its own:

The museum owners faced the problem that there are almost no authentic photographs related to Chiune Sugihara and Jan Zwartendijk in the museum collections. Therefore, the iconographic material was kindly provided by the Polish National Digital Archive, the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Nobuki Sugihara, dr. Jan Zwartendijk.⁶⁰

In the 'Diplomats of Hope' exhibition, besides clearly structured historical information, artistic and interactive solutions for the formation of the exhibition are also used. Information, art and interactive solutions form an interdependent harmony here. In the center of the exhibition, we see an artistic installation that symbolically connects the names of saved people, written on pieces of paper, with a 'visa for life' through threads of yellow thread. In the second plan of the installation, a world map can be seen through the density of threads, where the main directions of movement of refugees are marked. An interactive game for the young audience 'Sit down in the Diplomat's Chair' was created especially for this exhibition. According to V. Petrikėnas, 'the game emphasizes the importance of the will to help another person and the promotion of empathy for those who suffer.' According to the museologist, both museum colleagues and visitors respond positively to this modern exhibition. In his opinion, this is an exhibition with a unique character, which does not create monotony. According to V. Petrikėnas, the exhibitions

⁵⁸ Curator – museum worker Vytautas Jurkus.

⁵⁹ Information from V. Petrikėnas, 2022.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas dedicated to the rescue of the Jews are favorably evaluated, because alongside the theme of collaboration with the Nazis, the stories of the rescue of the Jews restore the sense of balance of the visitors and have a compensatory effect:

In the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, exhibitions are presented, which reveal the topic of collaboration of the local population with the Nazis, therefore <...> as counterbalance to the evil, information about the saviors of the Jews is presented to visitors. Such exhibitions are necessary for people to bring the light of hope from the pain-filled place of the Ninth Fort of Kaunas.⁶¹

5. The theme of rescuing the Jews in the upcoming ‘Lost Shtetl’ – ‘the theme came integrally’

The history of the Jews (as well as the aspects of their rescue) is planned to be realized by the project ‘Lost Shtetl’ from 2012 with the help of the public institution ‘Šeduva Jewish Memorial Foundation.’ One of its activities is the creation of the Šeduva Jewish Museum ‘Lost Shtetl.’ According to Sergejus Kanovičius, the author of the idea of this museum and the project manager, the aim of the museum is to tell the history of the creation, development and disappearance of Lithuanian shtetls using the example of the history of one shtetl (i.e. Šeduva).⁶² The museum’s mission is to give meaning to the word ‘shtetl’ by appealing to emotions and interpreting events, stories of specific people, and to overcome related stereotypes or gaps in knowledge in Lithuanian society. Hence, as expressed by researcher and curator of Jewish museums Irina Pocienė, ‘the example of Jewish history turns into a paradigm of learning from history.’⁶³ At least in the stage of preparation of the museum concept, it seems that the future museum will be innovative not only in the aspect of the chosen topic, but also in other criteria. First, in the case of the future museum, both the founding, the origins, and the interested communities match. The project is supported by the descendants of Šeduva Jews, the idea is developed in collaboration with the writer of Jewish origin S. Kanovičius with the former inhabitants of the Šeduva shtetl or their descendants (their most numerous colony is concentrated in the South African Republic). Secondly, avoiding the aspiration to tell the whole story of the Lithuanian shtetl in chronological order (which would mean the fragmentary nature of Lithuanian local museums), we will concentrate on one of its sections – the interwar period, thereby revealing, among other things, the involvement of the shtetl in the modernization processes of interwar Lithuania. In this way, prerequisites are created to overcome the static, ‘purity’ and homogeneity of the represented culture, which are so criticized by cultural anthropologists.⁶⁴ On the other hand, it is expected that the chronological framework of interwar Lithuania, as a ‘close’ and familiar history in terms of time, will presuppose the attractiveness, comprehensibility, and recognizability of the museum’s theme in today’s society, which also means the enrichment of Lithu-

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Here it continues to be based on: Interview with S. Kanovičius and M. Jakulyte Vasil, 2018.

⁶³ I. Pocienė, 2021, p. 34.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., J. Clifford, 2006, p. 337–344.

anian memory with new aspects of Jewish (and not only) history. Thirdly, the creators of the museum emphasize that the essential object of their activity is not the accumulation and preservation of material heritage, but the recording of the collective, ‘living,’ oral memory of the life of the shtetl community. This is related to paying attention not to exceptional, sanctified personalities, events, phenomena (which is characteristic of Lithuanian society’s memory of Jewish history and culture), but to ‘ordinary’ people, their everyday life and holidays, unique stories of their lives.

The theme of the Holocaust will also occupy a certain place in the scheme of the ‘Lost Shtetl’ museum narrative. A separate gallery will be dedicated to it. In it, the story will consist of the following aspects: the beginning of the war and the activities of the LAF (Lithuanian Activists Front) towards the Jews, the discrimination against the Jews of Šeduva at the end of June of 1941 and their isolation in one of the ‘camps’ in July, a two-day (August 25–26, 1941) chronology of the massacre of the Jews, presentation of victims, killers and rescuers. According to Milda Jakulytė Vasil, curator of the exhibition, after a long search for material, information was found about two saviors of the Jews: priest Mykolas Karosas and the Paluckai family. According to her, this is very little compared to the number of murderers:

*We don't know how the visitors will take it. It was very important for us to show how many killers there were, what was the mass <...> and how few were the rescuers. We have no more stories from Šeduva.*⁶⁵

However, the most important thing, according to the curator, is to present the spectrum of people’s involvement through the perspectives of victims, killers, observers and rescuers:

*You can get involved in killing, you can get involved by drawing the curtains (doing nothing is also involvement), or you can get involved by rescuing. There is good, there is evil, and there are many other things. We show it all in a row.*⁶⁶

As in the case of ‘Sugihara House,’ and with the ‘Lost Shtetl,’ where a museum is created with an idea but no collection, the first job was to find the stories and exhibit material. It began with a search for the descendants of the Šeduva shtetl (mostly living in the Republic of South Africa), because there were ‘just some random things in the archive: some document, a list, several photos and that was all.’ According to M. Jakulytė Vasil, during the investigation of one case – the Šeduva shtetl – it was not difficult to establish those connections with the descendants, and after catching the necessary thread, various layers of the shtetl’s past began to unveil. Therefore the search for descendants led to the topic of rescuing the Jews:

The author of the article. *Can we say that the rescue story came from oral history, not from the archives?*

⁶⁵ Interview with M. Jakulyte Vasil, 2022.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Milda Jakulytė Vasil: *At first, yes. Later we learned that this woman rescuer was awarded the Life Saviour's Cross. After that, something else... Little by little, that material came together. After we started to collect the material for the museum, only then one rescued person submitted the data to Yad Vashem and both the priest and the family were rewarded.*

The author of the article. *And why was he silent until then?*

Milda Jakulytė Vasil: *I don't know.*⁶⁷

The story of the rescue of the Jews in 'The Lost Shtetl' will be presented using the aforementioned principle of personalization. As the curator expressed, 'it is important for us to tell the people's story.' Rescuers will be introduced: priest Mykolas Karosas and the Paluckai family. This will be followed by the story of the rescued: their biography and the story of the rescue. All this will be presented with photos, texts, a Yad Vashem medal for the priest. The means are traditional, but according to M. Jakulytė Vasil, there are no other alternatives, because the most important criterion is the reliability of information:

*We would like something more, but it doesn't work out very well. We have interviews with grandchildren who were born after the war and clearly remembered those grandparents, but it is not a primary or even a secondary source. Already a third-party source, isn't it? The man himself, who was born in Šeduva during the rescue operation, he was a baby and does not remember anything. We don't have many such authentic stories.*⁶⁸

The curator of the 'Lost Shtetl' exhibition implicitly agrees with the curator of 'Sugihara House' L. Venclauskas regarding preferences for a more classical exhibition, and 'oversaturation' with abundant modern technologies:

*In principle, there will not be any terminals and databases in the exhibition, because, how to say here, it is no longer that experience, not a museum experience, although at first we wanted everything <...>. After that, we realized that those terminals are no longer good. We will have a library – a research center. This will be like a separate space for studying what we have collected about killers, rescuers and all other topics.*⁶⁹

However, from the current concept of the 'Lost Shtetl' Holocaust Gallery, it seems that the future exhibition will not focus on the other extreme – positivist neutrality, and with the help of modern principles of museology, a harmony of fact and emotion is sought.

Conclusions

The category of historical culture describes various forms, areas, and strategies of the manifestation of historical memory. This category also include museums, next to historiography, historical art, various forms of historical education, heritage preservation, etc. Despite the differences in these forms, areas, and strategies, all of them are unit-

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

ed by a certain activity of interpreting and communicating the past, which aims to solve the problems of orientation in time. The museum arises from the process of revaluing former 'garbage' and remains into heritage values. When these museum values are interpreted and communicated in museum spaces, various images that give meaning to the past are created. It could be mythifying, spreading nostalgia and prevailing narratives, or demythifying, critical, objective images.

In the discussed four Lithuanian museums (Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, 'Sugihara House,' The Ninth Fort of Kaunas, 'Lost Shtetl'), the theme of rescuing the Jews aims to present the most objective, all-encompassing image of this past and to perform several important functions using it. This is the education of Lithuanian and foreign visitors (the museum as a space of knowledge), honoring, remembering and thanking the Jewish saviors (the museum as a memorial space), refuting stereotypes related to the rescue of the Jews (the museum as a space of demythification).

Several narrative schemes of the rescue of the Jews are found in the studied Lithuanian museums. The rescue of the Jews in 'Sugihara House' and the Ninth Fort of Kaunas is seen in the pre-Holocaust period at the beginning of WWII and during the Holocaust in Lithuania. In the exhibition of Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History 'Rescued Lithuanian Jewish Child Tells about the Shoah' and 'Lost Shtetl' the topic of rescuing the Jews is concentrated on the Holocaust period.

The theme of rescuing of the Jews in the studied museums arises due to different circumstances. First of all, it is the orientation of the museum to the topic of rescuing the Jews in a certain period (Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, 'Sugihara House'). The emergence of the Jewish theme of the exhibition is also influenced by the availability of exhibition material related to this issue. In the case of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, it was a rich archive of memories, videos and photographs that appeared by I. Meras initiative in 2004, in 'Sugihara House' one exhibition about the rescue of the Jews was inspired by one received postcard, and in 'Lost Shtetl' the theme of the rescue of the Jews was encouraged by the information received about two cases of rescue. The third reason for the emergence of Jewish-themed exhibitions is the Lithuanian, Japanese, Dutch (and perhaps wider) processes of collective memory, which encourage museums (the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, 'Sugihara House') to commemorate the heroes of the past who were distinguished by humanistic deeds. The emergence of one exhibition in 'Sugihara House' was inspired by the desire coming from the field of academic history to 'fill' the gaps in the memory of Lithuanians and foreigners, to overcome their stereotypical view of the pre-Holocaust rescue of the Jews.

A similar museum language is presented in the studied museums on the topic of the Jewish rescue. All exhibitions are focused not on the museum objects, but on the topic – one or another aspect of the rescue of the Jews. These are usually stands, exhibitions arranged along the walls. Some of them (the Ninth Fort of Kaunas, Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History) also have artistic, memorial, and interactive elements. The 'aura' or *genius loci* of the museum gives part of the specific emotional charge to these exhibitions. This is the 'Sugihara House' located in the interwar period (1918–1940) modernist house of Kaunas, or the Ninth Fort Museum established in a former fortress, later prison and

concentration camp. Authentic exhibits in exhibitions devoted to the theme of the rescue of the Jews are an exception. That exception includes medals of the Righteous Among the Nations and/or 'Life Saviour's Cross Awards' in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas and 'Lost Shtetl', a postcard and furniture simulating the environment of the Japanese Consulate and other interior elements in 'Sugihara House,' video material in the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History. The predominant exhibition material is similar – it is scanned photographs and other iconographic material, documents, fragments of memories and explanatory texts.

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