



NCSEJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. October 20, 2017

Ukraine honors nationalist leader blamed for Jewish pogroms
Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 16, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/10/16/news-opinion/world/ukraine-statue-honors-nationalist-leader-blamed-for-jewish-pogroms>

Ukraine unveiled a statue for a nationalist leader who guided a regime that killed tens of thousands of Jews in pogroms during the Russian Revolution.

The memorial for Symon Petliura was unveiled Saturday in Vinnitsa, a city in the western part of the nation, on Defender of Ukraine Day, a national holiday, the RT news site reported. It is located in an area once known as Yerusalimka, or Jerusalem, and located next to a small synagogue that is still in operation.

The statue, which RT calls the first official monument to Petliura, though there is a bust of the early 20th-century leader in the capital, shows him sitting on a bench with a map of the country in his hands.

During Petliura's time as head of the Ukrainian People's Republic, 35,000 to 50,000 Jews were killed in a series of pogroms between 1918 and 1921.

Petliura was killed in 1926 by a Ukrainian-born Jewish watchmaker, Sholom Schwartzbard, who was acquitted by a French court that ruled he was acting in the heat of the moment after 15 of his relatives were killed in the pogroms.

Honoring of anti-Semites a 'problem,' says Israel's ambassador to Ukraine
Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 20, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/10/20/news-opinion/world/honoring-of-anti-semites-a-problem-says-israels-ambassador-to-ukraine>

In a rare public statement on the honoring of anti-Semites in Ukraine, Israel's ambassador to that country called the phenomenon a "problem" that is "not in line" with Israel's interests.

Eliav Belotzerovsky said this Friday during a conference of the Limmud FSU group in the southern city of Odessa, according to a translation of his remarks provided by a spokesperson for the organization, which organizes Jewish learning conferences for Russian speakers across the former Soviet Union and beyond.

His comments followed a wave of condemnations by several Jewish groups for the unveiling in the western city of Vinnitsa of a statue for Symon Petliura. During Petliura's time as head of the Ukrainian People's Republic, 35,000 to 50,000 Jews were killed in a series of pogroms between 1918 and 1921. In recent years, various honors have been paid in Ukraine to several nationalists who are admired locally for fighting Russian domination, but also reviled over accusations of hatred of Jews and complicity in atrocities against them.

"Israel has a sympathetic ear in Ukraine, there is constant interaction with the government in order to deal with the problem," Belotzerovsky is quoted as having said. "There is a trend, nationalism is on the rise," Belotzerovsky reportedly added at the weekend-long event, which drew 1,000 participants. A theme of the conference in Odessa is the exploration of the roots there of the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. His paternal grandmother, Anna Zimmerman, together with her husband Zigman, immigrated to the United States from Odessa in 1910. Today, approximately 80,000 Jews live in Odessa.

Separately, the World Jewish Congress' International Yiddish Culture Center will be holding an international conference in Odessa next week devoted to the centenary of death of the Mendele Mokher Sforim, one of the best-known writers in Yiddish.

Earlier this year, the western municipality of Kalush near Lviv was sued for deciding to name a street for Dmytro Paliiv, a commander of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, also known as the 1st Galician.

The naming of the street for Paliiv, whose troops murdered countless Jews during the Holocaust, is part of a series of gestures honoring nationalists in Ukraine following the 2014 revolution, in which nationalists played a leading role. They brought down the government of President Viktor Yanukovych, whose critics said was a corrupt Russian stooge.

Also before the revolution, Stepan Bandera, Roman Shukhevych and other nationalists accused of complicity in the murder of Ukrainian Jews have received honors from state authorities for their fight against Russia.

But the level and frequency of state-sponsored glorification of their actions has increased dramatically after the revolution, which sparked an armed conflict with Russian troops and separatists loyal to Moscow.

Israel has remained largely silent on this issue in accordance with her policy of neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Israel Declares Ukraine Safe, Removing Hurdle to Rejecting Citizens' Asylum Requests

By Ilan Lior

Haaretz, October 16, 2017

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.817614>

Israel will now be able to reject Ukrainian citizens' asylum requests more rapidly because of new guidelines from the Population and Immigration Authority, which deem Ukraine a safe state.

The guidelines, which go into effect on Tuesday, come after a sharp rise in applications for asylum from Ukrainians; under the new rules, there will be no impediment to returning Ukrainian citizens back to their country.

The last two years have seen a spike in the number of asylum requests by Ukrainians, who can enter Israel without a visa. Many are brought here by middlemen who promise them work and lodging and advise them to request asylum. Due to the heavy volume, these requests can take years to process and until they are denied, the seekers cannot be deported.

There are currently 20,000 Ukrainian citizens in Israel, 15,000 of whom have applied for asylum. Around 7,000 applications have been filed since the beginning of this year alone. The new guidelines will allow for a more speedy denial of these applications, with no need for a thorough review – the process will now take only a few weeks.

Since fighting with Russian separatists broke out four years ago in several areas of Ukraine, the Foreign Ministry and Justice Ministry held back on declaring the country a safe space. The ministries recently approved the declaration for all of Ukraine except for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in its east. Prof. Shlomo Mor-Yosef, the director of the Population and Immigration Authority, instructed that all asylum applications be handed over to Yossi Edelstein, the head of the unit responsible for foreign workers and enforcement.

The new rules are based on an opinion written by the Foreign Ministry's deputy director-general for Eurasian affairs, Alexander Ben-Zvi, which was drafted after consultations with ministry officials and the Israeli Embassy in Kiev. It states that there has been unrest in Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014 due to tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but notes that it has diminished in the last two years. It says that while many Ukrainians had to leave their homes during that period and look for other places to live, including overseas, there are currently no issues with returning Ukrainian citizens to their homeland. "Applications by people from [Donetsk and Luhansk] will be further considered before a final decision is made," Mor-Yosef wrote Edelstein.

Interior Minister Arye Dery has tried to promote Ukraine as a safe country in recent months, and a ministerial delegation went there to hold discussions with government officials. "Asylum requests by people coming in on tourist visas are the most worrisome problem we're dealing with these days," said Dery. "We'll do whatever we can to stop it, by legislation or enforcement. The thousands of applications are a burden on the system, preventing our professionals from dealing with authentic requests."

Bulgarian government appoints national coordinator for the fight against anti-Semitism

By Clive Leviev-Sawyer

Sofia Globe, October 18, 2017

<https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/10/18/bulgarian-government-appoints-national-co-ordinator-for-the-fight-against-anti-semitism/>

Bulgaria's Cabinet has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism and has appointed Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev as national co-ordinator for the fight against anti-Semitism.

This was announced after the Cabinet held a regular weekly meeting on October 18 2017.

The adoption of the IHRA's definition is an important step towards Bulgaria becoming a full member of the alliance. The IHRA decided in July 2017 to accept Bulgaria as a liaison country, making it the first country since 2009 to take this step towards full membership. Bulgaria was admitted as an observer country in December 2012.

The IHRA's working definition of anti-Semitism, adopted by the alliance in May 2016, is: "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance currently has 31 member states and 11 observer countries, including Bulgaria. The alliance is open for membership to all democratic states that adhere to the Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust. The declaration commits to national policies to combat acts of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

The European Parliament adopted the working definition of anti-Semitism in June 2017, in a resolution calling on all EU countries and EU institutions to adopt and implement it. This should be done to support the efforts of judicial authorities and law enforcement authorities to more effectively identify and prosecute anti-Semitic acts.

The document also called on EU countries to appoint national anti-Semitism co-ordinators and to take measures to build and strengthen partnerships, consultations and dialogue with Jewish communities and institutions to ensure the security of their Jewish citizens and Jewish religious, educational and cultural institutions, promote the study and commemoration of the Holocaust.

The main function of the national anti-Semitism co-ordinator is to liaise and interact with the European Commission's co-ordinator and other EU national coordinators, with other partner countries as well as with international organizations with relevance and activities in the fight against anti-Semitism and hate speech, such as the UN, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Council of Europe, Unesco and others, the Bulgarian government statement on October 18 said.

The Shalom Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria welcomed the Cabinet decision, noting that it put Bulgaria among the first countries to heed the European Parliament's call to formally adopt the working definition of anti-Semitism and name a national co-ordinator.

Others that have done so range from France, Germany, the UK, the Czech Republic, to Greece, Poland and Sweden.

“For the Bulgarian Jewish community, this is a serious call for an uncompromising attitude towards all actions that overwhelm common values such as tolerance, humanism and respect for human rights. We strongly support the Cabinet decision and wish Georg Georgiev success in his new mission,” Shalom said.

On October 17, during an official visit to Bulgaria, David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee Global Jewish Advocacy and AJC Europe director Simone Rodan-Benzaquen held talks with Deputy Foreign Minister Georgiev.

The meeting was attended by the president of the Shalom Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria, Dr Alek Oscar, Shalom chief executive Julia Dandolovala and the representative of the AJC for Bulgaria, Viktor Melamed.

During the talks, a new line of co-operation was launched, presenting the history of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews and the heroism of the Bulgarian people by leaders of the Bulgarian Jewish community and Bulgarian diplomats, whom the AJC will work with to access the highest international forums

These efforts will be made in the context of celebrating in 2018 the 75th anniversary of the prevention of the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews and the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Georgiev said that Bulgaria’s active co-operation with the American Jewish community plays an important role both in the development of bilateral Bulgarian-US relations and in deepening of the strategic partnership with the United States and in promoting practical cooperation between Bulgaria and the state of Israel.

A Bulgarian Foreign Ministry statement quoted Georgiev as saying that he hoped that Bulgaria would be a full member of IHRA by the end of 2018.

Harris said that the 75th anniversary in 2018 to present and promote to Jewish communities around the world the worthy action of Bulgaria and its people. “It’s a unique story to me, and the best thing is that it’s real. It deserves being seen and heard by more people,” Harris said.

Deputy Minister Georgiev pointed out that such joint projects could be organized within the forthcoming Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU. Bulgaria has a lot to be proud of, and we have to tell the world about the historical feats of our people, he said.

Harris and Georgiev agreed that the protection of common values such as tolerance, humanism, respect for human rights is a guarantee that catastrophes such as the Second World War will not be repeated again, the Foreign Ministry said.

Bulgaria was a member of Nazi Germany’s Axis during the Second World War and approved anti-Semitic legislation, the Defence of the Nation Act. The government of the time in Sofia agreed to the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews but when this became known, an outcry among society – led by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, politicians notably including Dimitar Peshev, intellectuals and ordinary people – prevented the planned deportation of the Bulgarian Jews.

However, in Bulgaria’s “new territories” of the time, in northern Greece and parts of Yugoslavia, more than 11 000 Jews were deported, all but less than a handful being mass-murdered in the Holocaust in which more than six million Jews were killed. The Defence of the Nation Act had barred these Jews from Bulgarian citizenship.

In 2018, both the prevention of the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews and the murder of the Jews from the “new territories” will be commemorated.

PM to Russian defense minister: Israel won't allow Iranian presence in Syria

By Judah Ari Gross

Times of Israel, October 17, 2017

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-to-russian-defense-minister-israel-wont-allow-iranian-presence-in-syria/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Russian defense chief Sergei Shoigu on Tuesday that Israel will not tolerate the presence of Iran on its borders, his office said.

Netanyahu also repeated his view that without a renegotiation of the Iran nuclear deal, the Islamic Republic would be in possession of an atomic weapon within the next decade.

Shoigu arrived in Israel on Monday for his first official visit.

"Iran needs to understand that Israel will not allow it" to militarily entrench itself in Syria, Netanyahu said during the meeting.

Shoigu's Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, was also present at the meeting.

On his first day, Shoigu met separately with Liberman, who was joined by members of the IDF General Staff and officials from the Defense Ministry.

During the meeting, Shoigu told Liberman that Russia's military operation in Syria is "nearing completion, and some issues need to be tackled immediately," according to Russian state media.

The Russian defense minister said that included the countries' military cooperation, as well as the overall fight against terrorism and the general situation in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Liberman also raised Iran's growing presence in Syria, as well as its proxies'.

"We will not get involved in internal matters in Syria," Liberman told the Russian defense minister on Monday, "but, on the other hand, we will not allow Iran and Hezbollah to turn Syrian territory into a forward operating base against Israel."

Liberman told Shoigu that Israel is "operating responsibly and with determination" in Syria.

"We will not allow the transfer of advanced weaponry by Iran through Syria to Lebanon," he added.

Israel attributed great importance to Shoigu's visit, his first since entering his position in 2012, and the first visit by a Russian defense minister to the Jewish state in many years.

"I am very glad to see the Russian defense minister in the State of Israel. This is the first visit, and the first visit of a defense minister has exceptional importance," Liberman said.

"We greatly appreciate our relations with Russia," he said. "We don't always agree, but we always speak directly and openly. We believe that the moment there's open dialogue, you can overcome all problems."

Shoigu's trip got off to a rocky start, coming hours after the IDF bombed an anti-aircraft battery belonging to Russia's ally Syria after it had earlier fired an interceptor missile at an Israeli plane.

The Russian defense minister was greeted with an honor guard at the IDF's Tel Aviv headquarters, known as the Kirya, where he also met briefly with World War II Red Army veterans who live in Israel.

"We greatly appreciate our memory of World War II. Many of our grandfathers and grandmothers fought in the ranks of the Red Army and we value the way Russia treats and remembers them today, and how [Russia] treats the memory of those who fought and died in the Second World War," Liberman said.

After the honor guard, Shoigu and Liberman met privately in the latter's office. They were then joined by IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, head of IDF Military Intelligence Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevi and the head of the powerful political-security affairs bureau of the Defense Ministry, Zohar Palti, as well as by members of the Russian defense minister's entourage.

The discussion was focused primarily on Syria and the increasing influence of Iran and Shiite militias there, according to the Defense Ministry.

As the Syrian civil war appears to be coming to a close, Israel's attention has increasingly turned to the threats posed by Syria's other ally, Iran, which is believed to be establishing bases and military infrastructure near the Israeli border on the Golan Heights.

Israel has reportedly asked Russia and the United States to include in ceasefire agreements for the Syrian conflict an assurance that Iran-backed Shiite militias not be allowed within 60 kilometers (37 miles) of the border. However, according to reports, these requests have been denied.

While this is Shoigu's first visit to Israel in his five years as defense minister, he has made multiple trips to Syria, including one earlier this month, as well as a surprise stop in Iran last year.

The soft-spoken defense minister is seen by many analysts as a driving force behind Russia's aggressive support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

The visit is a departure from recent years, which have seen Israeli leaders travel to Russia multiple times for diplomatic meetings, but almost no such sit-downs had taken place in Israel.

The rare meeting came on the heels of the brief exchange of fire between Israel and Syria on Monday morning.

Shortly before 9 a.m., the Syrian military launched an SA-5 anti-aircraft missile at Israeli reconnaissance planes, which it said had entered Syrian airspace from Lebanon. The IDF denied that its aircraft crossed the border, maintaining that they had been flying only over Lebanon, collecting intelligence.

According to the IDF, no Israeli planes were damaged by the interceptor, but the Syrian military said in a statement that it "directly hit" one of them.

Approximately three hours later, Israeli fighter jets retaliated, bombing the SA-5 missile defense battery that was believed to have launched the interceptor.

The IDF said the battery was "incapacitated."

As Russia maintains a heavy presence in Syria in order to assist its ally, Assad, an IDF spokesperson said the military informed Moscow of the impending attack on Assad's army "in real time."

The nearly three-hour delay between the initial attack on the Israeli aircraft and the retaliation was attributed by analysts to Israeli concerns about the potential problems that a reprisal could cause, coming so close to Shoigu's visit.

Israel has repeatedly stated that it will act militarily in Syria if one of its "red lines" is violated, notably the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah or, in this case, a direct attack on Israeli aircraft.

In order to avoid friction and accidental conflict, for the past two years Israel and Russia have coordinated their military efforts in Syria.

Israeli officials do not generally discuss the full extent of that coordination, but they stress that the Israeli military does not seek Russian permission before carrying out operations.

The Lubyanka Keeps Its Secrets: Russia and the Wallenberg Case

By Andrei Kolesnikov

Carnegie Moscow Center, October 19, 2017

<http://carnegie.ru/commentary/73473>

The mystery surrounding the death of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg in Moscow in 1947 may not be solved even seventy years on. Last month, a Moscow court dismissed a lawsuit in which Wallenberg's niece Marie Dupuy sought to obtain documents regarding the circumstances of his death. The court agreed with Russia's domestic intelligence service, the FSB, that the petition should be denied under the pretense of "privacy" and "lack of legal jurisdiction."

The verdict, of course, is ludicrous. It demonstrates a modern Russian state still refusing to come to terms with its troubling Stalinist legacy. If the FSB—heir of the KGB and the Stalinist NKVD—bears no responsibility for Stalin's crimes, why won't it disclose the whole truth in this high-profile case? Instead, the security services use the cloak of secrecy to mask the country's shameful history and uphold a morally compromised system.

Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who famously saved thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II. After the Red Army entered Budapest, the Soviet counterintelligence agency, SMERSH, arrested him on suspicion of espionage for either the Germans or the Americans—perhaps even for being a double agent. When it became evident that Wallenberg presented no value for the intelligence services, the NKVD decided to eliminate him.

A medical report dated July 17, 1947, was eventually made public. The official cause of death was listed as a heart attack, and an attached note read "body to be cremated without an autopsy."

Yet another version of the diplomat's death, corroborated by multiple independent sources, suggests that he was in fact murdered.

In recently published memoirs, former KGB chief Ivan Serov claims that Wallenberg was killed on orders from Minister of State Security Viktor Abakumov in 1947. "When questioned, Abakumov recalled Wallenberg's case in particular and cited direct orders from Stalin and Molotov. Likewise, the director of Lubyanka's Laboratory 1, Grigory Mairanovsky, confirmed that there were a number of foreign citizens poisoned in the two years around Wallenberg's death."

Serov also recalls that he discussed the case with Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev, who listened carefully and then said, "These scoundrels Stalin, Molotov, and Vyshinsky stirred up this damn mess, and now we're the ones dealing with this crap."

After Serov's book was published, Wallenberg's relatives requested further transcripts of Abakumov's interrogation. Yet the FSB refused to provide the documents, and the court has now supported its position. The security service claimed that the documents contained sensitive and private information about third parties. They further argued that the FSB is not the NKVD's legal successor, and thus is not obligated to furnish Wallenberg's documents.

The way the FSB has handled this case demonstrates it actually to be a worthy successor to the NKVD, MGB, and KGB. The present-day security service has treated the Wallenberg case no differently than its predecessors who concealed the diplomat's death for decades and covered up Stalin's atrocities. The cover-up drove Wallenberg's mother and stepfather to suicide. That culture of secrecy has cast a pall over Russia's relations with Sweden for decades.

The gravity of these allegations cannot be overstated. This isn't a case about someone's private life but evidence of the state abusing its own citizens and foreign nationals. These are real histories of the Stalinist regime and its mass murder machine—subjects about which there can be no moral ambiguity.

A modicum of transparency would reflect well on the current Russian regime and separate it from the legacy of the Stalin regime. But a case like this suggests that Russia's current rulers are not so different from their

predecessors after all. Today's elites in Russia seemingly aspire to live like the oligarch Roman Abramovich but also to rule like Stalin.

From Stalinist times the Russian authorities have inherited the notion that secrecy is a powerful weapon that must be defended as fiercely as the idea of "sovereignty." Even if, as in this case, secrecy means defending long-dead interrogators whose names do not even figure in the archival documents—and keeping hidden the truth about the death of a man who is honored for his heroism in every country of the world except Russia.

Get ready for the smoke and mirrors of Putin 2018

By Adam Taylor

Washington Post, October 19, 2017

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/19/get-ready-for-the-smoke-and-mirrors-of-putin-2018/?utm_term=.99713c124241

Next March, Russians will go to the polls to elect their next president. Almost two dozen people have put their names forward as candidates so far. The latest, according to The Washington Post's Andrew Roth, is Ksenia Sobchak. She isn't your standard politician: a 35-year-old socialite with 5.2 million Instagram followers, she was once infamously dubbed "Russia's Paris Hilton."

Sobchak is also the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the late mayor of St. Petersburg. She is part of a Kremlin-linked elite by birth, though she has aligned herself with Russia's embattled opposition since the disputed 2011 elections for the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament. In a slick promotional video announcing her candidacy, Sobchak said she is running as the "against all" candidate for disaffected Russian voters.

While Sobchak has plenty of name recognition, she stands little chance of winning. And many cynics in fact argue that the presence of a young, well-known liberal candidate like Sobchak in the end only demonstrates why Vladimir Putin is all but certain to win again.

In one way or another, Putin has run Russia since Aug. 16, 1999, when he became prime minister of Russia. He stepped up to become president the next year and held on to that position until 2008 when his ally Dmitry Medvedev took over, a move intended to circumvent a constitutional provision that says presidents cannot serve more than two consecutive terms. While Medvedev served as president, according to most analysts, Putin returned to the prime minister's office and wielded real power from that position, then returned to the presidency in 2012.

Putin is now the longest-serving Russian leader since Joseph Stalin, who led the Soviet Union for almost three decades between 1924 and 1953. He is allowed to run again in 2018 under the constitution, and polls consistently show Putin holding the kind of approval ratings that President Trump or French President Emmanuel Macron would dream of. Yet he still has not committed to seeking another term. "I have not decided whether I will run at all," Putin said at the beginning of October.

So why, with less than six months to go until election day, has he not done so? Earlier this year, Mark Galeotti, a Russia expert currently with the Institute of International Relations Prague, suggested to Newsweek that there was a lack of enthusiasm for the election. Putin and his allies, Galeotti guessed, "now just want to get through the tedious necessity of an election with the least fuss and embarrassment as possible."

Some rumors suggest that Putin may finally announce his candidacy on Thursday. Even if he does, however, don't expect the ambiguity to stop. In fact, the smoke and mirrors may just be getting started.

Sobchak's entry into opposition politics has long been the subject of scrutiny. The socialite has numerous links to the current Russian president: Her father was one of the most important men in Putin's life, hiring him as his deputy mayor in St. Petersburg back in the chaotic 1990s. The Russian publication New Times, who broke the story of her candidacy, reported that Sobchak is only running in a bid to get jobs on Russia's federally run television channels.

So when Sobchak's candidacy was first reported, there were groans from many Russia-watchers, many of whom suggested she was an obvious Kremlin spoiler. To many, Sobchak's candidacy is reminiscent of the 2012 run by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, who was widely suspected to have run in a bid to split the opposition vote — an accusation the billionaire denied.

Such maneuvers hardly seem necessary: In the end, Prokhorov lost the election with 8 percent of the vote to Putin's 63.6 percent. It seems more likely that candidates like Sobchak are needed to lend an air of legitimacy to Russia's democracy, which has long ceased to be a one-party system and now looks more like a one-person system — something that may be turning off Russian voters.

Last month, Bloomberg View's Leonid Bershidsky pointed to declining turnout in regional elections as a potential problem for the Kremlin. "Putin may already suspect that he runs a country of cynics who tolerate him because they have no choice or because they profit from it," Bershidsky wrote. "A low turnout could make this official."

Giving the role of sacrificial challenger to a true opposition figure like dogged anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny is probably too much genuine democracy. But Sobchak, an apparently non-threatening celebrity politician whose run looks to have Kremlin approval, seems to fit the bill.

Navalny appears to think as much himself. When rumors about Sobchak's candidacy first appeared a few weeks ago, he offered a warning: "They need a cartoonish liberal candidate at a time when they don't want to allow me to enter the race." Navalny, who is currently serving a 20-day jail term for organizing a protest without government approval, cannot run next year because of several felony convictions — ones he says were designed to disqualify him.

No matter the reason for Sobchak's run, it is worth paying attention close attention to the election. Putin is now 65, and it may be approaching the time where a genuine succession plan will be required. And while his theoretical reelection is all but assured, how Putin plays next year's vote could indicate where Russian politics will be heading.

Poland to partially compensate for property looted under Nazis and communists, official says Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 13, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/10/13/news-opinion/world/poland-to-partially-compensate-for-private-owned-looted-property-official-says>

The World Jewish Restitution Organization cautiously welcomed a Polish official's announcement of plans to offer partial compensation for property confiscated from private owners under communism.

Countless properties that belonged to Poland's 3.3 million-strong Jewish population before the Holocaust were seized by the Nazi occupation forces and then nationalized under communism.

Polish Deputy Justice Minister Patryk Jaki announced plans for the legislation on Wednesday, marking a break from the government's previous reliance on individual court rulings to determine restitution rather than through legislation.

Poland is the only major country in Europe that not passed national legislation for the restitution of property unjustly seized by the Nazis nor for property nationalized by the communist regime, according to the WJRO.

"I'm ashamed that it has taken Poland until now, 28 years after the fall of communism, to prepare such a bill. This should have been taken care of a long time ago," the PAP news agency quoted Jaki as saying during a press conference in Warsaw Wednesday.

The law would allow for cash payments of up to 20 percent of the value of privately-owned properties at the time of their "nationalization," Jaki told the broadcaster TVN24, adding that the bill was "absolutely fair."

Restitution experts estimate that following the Holocaust, Jewish individuals and institutions in Poland lost property whose combined value exceeds \$1 billion.

“We welcome the recognition today by Poland that national legislation is needed to address the issue of confiscated property,” Gideon Taylor, WJRO’s chair of operations, said in a statement Thursday. “However, it is essential that restitution or compensation be full and complete and that it be just and fair for all who lost property, including Polish survivors of the Holocaust and their families,” the statement read.

WJRO has joined other vocal critics of Poland over its perceived failure even by Eastern European standards to offer Jewish victims of property theft during and after the Holocaust and their descendants neither adequate restitution nor procedures to obtain it.

In July, WJRO sharply criticized a Polish court’s ruling upholding restitution legislation whose language precluded countless Jewish would-be claimants.

The law, passed last year, precludes claims in Warsaw for former owners and their families who missed the 1988 communist-era deadline for filing claims, including those who fled abroad to escape communist rule or anti-Semitism.

Poland in 1997 passed a law for restitution on communal-owned properties, but more than 15 years after the claim filing deadline, a majority of more than 5,000 claims for such property has still not been resolved and most of the resolved claims have not led to restitution or compensation, the WJRO said.

At former Nazi death camp Sobibor, a post-Holocaust construction boom

By Matt Lebovic

Times of Israel, October 17, 2017

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/at-former-nazi-death-camp-sobibor-a-post-holocaust-construction-boom/>

For the first time since SS men dismantled and plowed over Sobibor in 1943, significant construction is underway in the most sensitive parts of the former Nazi-built death camp, where up to 250,000 Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

On the heels of a decade-long archeological dig, ground was broken this spring on a long-anticipated museum and visitor center. The structure is emerging atop former barracks in which Jews of all ages were forced to hand over their belongings, undress, and run toward “showers” that were actually gas chambers.

Set to open in 2019, the museum-memorial complex will contain an unprecedented precise map of Sobibor’s Holocaust-era features based on new research. The prisoner revolt that took place on Sukkot in October of 1943 will be recounted, along with the Nazis’ efforts to obliterate evidence of genocide following that escape 74 years ago.

The other major change to take place at Sobibor in recent months was at the mass graves area, where corpses were burned and the ashes buried in pits. Until this spring’s transformation of the site, small human bone fragments rose to the surface whenever the ground thawed, dismaying visitors.

Under the supervision of rabbinical authorities, the graves were covered with permeable geotextile and a layer of white crushed marble. Surrounding the jagged-edged necropolis, a border of larger, dark-colored stones was added to demarcate graves that were extensively pillaged after 1945.

In contrast to the former Nazi death camps at Belzec and Treblinka, the mass graves of Sobibor were not covered in layers of asphalt, concrete, or boulders, during the decades since the Holocaust.

With the exception of a rotund “ash mound” monument, the relative barrenness of the “extermination area” helped Poland’s Wojciech Mazurek and Israel’s Yoram Haimi — lead archeologists at Sobibor since 2007 — uncover artifacts and information about the crematoria on which more than 200,000 corpses were “eliminated” in the open air.

Sobibor has been relatively slow to add modern facilities, including a parking lot for buses. Close to the Bug River and Poland's border with Ukraine, it is a drive of several hours from both Warsaw and Krakow.

Planners hope their efforts will make coming to Sobibor more convenient, and engaging, for both Poles and international tourists. Among museum highlights will be victims' belongings unearthed by the Polish-Israeli excavation team, including children's metal nameplates, jewelry with Hebrew inscriptions, and a ceramic mug fragment featuring Mickey Mouse.

Even with construction taking place at Sobibor during the next two years, archeologists hope to keep excavating at — for instance — the site of a prisoner-built escape tunnel, and in the area of “the ramp,” where victims were delivered to the disguised “transit camp.” In the months ahead, workers will erect a pavilion around the gas chamber ruins unearthed by Haimi and Mazurek in 2014, and a long, winding memorial wall with survivors' testimony will be built to encircle the mass graves.

Next October, Sobibor will host a gathering to mark the 75th anniversary of the prisoner revolt. The commemoration may be the first of its kind to take place without survivors of the former death camp. By the time the museum opens in 2019, personal artifacts will play a larger role than ever in supplementing the testimony of eye-witnesses, of whom fewer remain alive each day.

Protests by Polish Anti-Fascist Group Lead to Withdrawal of Antisemitic Figurines from parliament Gift Shop in Warsaw

By Ben Cohen

Algemeiner, October 17, 2017

<https://www.algemeiner.com/2017/10/17/protests-by-polish-anti-fascist-group-lead-to-withdrawal-of-antisemitic-figurines-from-parliament-gift-shop-in-warsaw/>

One of Poland's leading anti-racist organizations has successfully prevented the continued sale of antisemitic figurines at a gift shop inside the Polish Parliament building in Warsaw, following several weeks of quiet protest.

Rafal Pankowski — a Warsaw-based scholar and cofounder of the anti-fascist organization “Nigdy Wiecej” (Never Again) — told The Algemeiner on Thursday that his group had raised the issue earlier this year, after he noticed that the figurines — which depicted Jews as wealthy moneylenders and financiers — were on sale at the shop. Among those with whom the issue was raised was Warsaw's deputy mayor, Michał Olszewski. However, a subsequent visit to the shop by one of Pankowski's associates revealed that the figurines were still on sale.

Last week, at a meeting at the office of Polish Human Rights Commissioner Adam Bodnar, Pankowski again publicly protested the sale of the figurines, notifying the Polish media and a number of Polish MPs as to their availability at the Parliament shop. According to Pankowski, the dolls were removed from sale following the intervention of the speaker of the Polish Parliament, Marek Kuchcinski.

Pankowski said the figurines “represent a deeply-rooted negative stereotype of the greedy Jew in the Polish culture.”

“They have become widespread in Poland in the last two decades or so; in fact, they were not widespread before that,” he noted. A *Vice* investigation published earlier this week observed that such figurines are regarded by many Poles as a positive good luck charm, with one wood-carver claiming that he made the figurines to “honor” of the memory of Poland's Jewish population, 90 percent of whom were murdered during the Nazi Holocaust.

Abraham Foxman, the national director emeritus of the Anti-Defamation League and the head of an antisemitism study program at the Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York, told The Algemeiner on Tuesday that the figurines were “classic antisemitism, cultural antisemitism.”

Foxman recounted that he had met two years ago with the Polish education minister, who told him that the figurines should be seen as a compliment. "I said, 'That's a compliment that led to Auschwitz,'" he recalled.

Foxman pointed out that the antisemitic association of Jews with financial greed was not restricted to the Nazi period. "Even after the war, Jews were killed in Poland because they were seen as having money," he said.

Antisemitic crimes in France over the last decade were a more recent example of where the association of Jews with money can lead, Foxman went on to say. In 2006, Ilan Halimi, a young French Jew, was kidnapped, tortured and eventually murdered by a gang that confessed to seizing him because "Jews have money." Just last month, Paris Jewish community leader Roger Pinto, his wife Mireille, and their son David were taken hostage in their own home by a gang whose leader told them, "We know that the Jews have a lot of money and you will give us what you have."

Pankowski said that while there were worse examples of contemporary antisemitism in Poland, the ongoing social acceptance of the figurines was "very symbolic."

"It shows a climate of tolerance of antisemitism by some Polish institutions," he added. "Despite the climate, we at 'Never Again' are determined to monitor and fight antisemitism in Poland now and in the future, too."

Foxman stressed that the problem of the figurines' continued sale at outlets all over Poland could not be resolved by a ban. "You have to educate about it," he said. "They need to educate at the schools, and then maybe this problem will go away." Today, Foxman said, "you walk outside the Parliament building, and there it is."

No, Chabad is not 'feuding' with Jewish leaders in Poland

By Mayer Stambler and Sholom B. Stambler

Forward, October 19, 2017

<http://forward.com/opinion/letters/385612/no-chabad-is-not-feuding-with-jewish-leaders-in-poland/>

A recent article in the Forward claimed that by accepting an invitation to a meeting with Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of Poland's ruling conservative party, Chabad is "feuding" with Jewish organizations. This is not true. Chabad violated no understanding, explicit or implicit, nor any relationship with the other Jewish representatives by taking this meeting. In fact, it was our duty to the Jewish community to attend this meeting. Here's why:

As was reported in the article, in July, representatives of two of Poland's Jewish organizations — Mr. Leslaw Piszewski and Ms. Anna Chipczynska — published an open letter to Mr. Kaczynski about their fears of rising anti-Semitism.

Their letter went unanswered. But several weeks later, we at Chabad, along with other Jewish representatives, were invited to meet with Mr. Kaczynski.

This is not uncommon. Chabad — as other Jewish organizations — often meets with government representatives of their respective Jewish communities; and the invitation we received made no reference to the letter sent by the two community representatives.

We understand that it is upsetting to Mr. Piszewski and Ms. Chipczynska that they received no response to their letter. But the indignance at our meeting with Mr. Kaczynski as expressed in this article is ironic in the extreme and reveals a double standard when it comes to Chabad.

As I wrote in my email response to the Forward, "we have never claimed to represent all Jewish organizations or that we are the exclusive representatives of the community."

This the authors of The Forward article interpret as "virtually a declaration of full autonomy."

Really? “Autonomy” from whom? As if until now Chabad was in a dependent relationship with Mr. Piczewski or the organization he leads!

The writers of the public letter presumptuously purport to speak for all of Poland’s Jews, and yet at no point was Chabad of Poland, as one of this country’s representative Jewish organizations, consulted or notified about the letter. Indeed, had we been consulted about the letter, we would have suggested a less confrontational, more effective approach in seeking Mr. Kacyzinski’s intervention.

But the irony goes even further. The article states that “mainstream Jewish groups are increasingly worried that Chabad... is allying itself with authoritarian governments.”

How so? Since when does a meeting with the government become an alliance with the government? Is it not curious that these “mainstream” Jewish groups in Poland who accept both funds and real estate from the government without any concerns about forging dubious “alliances” now profess to “worry” about Chabad attending a meeting with the government?

Certainly, they would not have refused to meet with Mr. Kaczynski had they been invited. How ironic then is their “alarm” at the imagined alliances between the government and Chabad of Poland, which, unlike the other Jewish organizations, has never benefited from any funds or the restoration of Jewish property by this or previous Polish governments.

The article also quotes Konstantyn Gebert, a prominent Jewish journalist in Poland as accusing Chabad of “an act of disloyalty to the existing Jewish community” by accepting the invitation. But in fact, in an August 23 interview on Polish television, when asked if he thought Chabad’s meeting with Kaczynski was inappropriate, Mr. Piszewski said, “No. We do not we have any problem with Chabad-Lubavitch meeting with Mr. Kaczynski.”

Apparently, Mr. Piszewski recognized that it would be ludicrous for him to make such an accusation in public. He knows, as Mr. Gebert surely must, that no benefit would have accrued to the Jewish community by refusing the invitation to meet with Poland’s leader.

Indeed, to do so would have been a betrayal of our responsibility to our community and a disservice to Polish Jewry at large.

It is a pity that the writers of this article did not bother to visit Chabad’s centers in Warsaw and Cracow and meet with any of the hundreds of Jews who participated in Chabad’s High Holiday and Sukkot programs and services. Had they done so, they may have been more careful about making outlandish claims of “mainstream” Jews in Poland now beset by “worry” at Chabad’s meeting with Mr. Kaczynski.

Instead of appreciating the opportunity the meeting offered the Jewish community to have its concerns addressed, the article inflames petty grievances unbecoming of Poland’s Jewish leaders and paints a terribly misleading portrait of hostility within the Jewish community.

Contrary to your provocative title, Chabad most certainly is not “feuding” with Jewish leaders. Notwithstanding the disagreements between us on a number of issues, we maintain cordial relations with all the organized Jewish communities of Poland.

An Ambitious Project ID’d 80% of Hungarian Jews Murdered in the Holocaust

By Ofer Aderet

Haaretz, October 20, 2017

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.818187>

Only a few years ago no one knew anything about Samuel (Shmuel) Lederer. Even his name was undocumented. The farmer and public figure, one of the 13 Jews who lived in the remote Hungarian village of Magyarmecske, disappeared without a trace.

Statistically, he was only a number, just one person out of the million anonymous Holocaust victims, whose names remained unknown some 70 years after the end of World War II.

Recently, the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial center in Jerusalem completed a unique documentary project, giving Lederer his name back – along with his life story. Yad Vashem now knows not only that Lederer existed but also his birthdate (July 31, 1864), where he grew up (in the small village in southwestern Hungary's Baranya district), his parents' names (David Lederer and Fanni nee Honig), his younger brother's name (Rudolph "Reszo" Lederer), his wife's name (Gizella Fleischer) and how many children he had (two daughters).

The people responsible for turning Lederer from a number into a name with a story and life are the team behind the Names Recovery Project, which has collected the names of Hungarian Jews murdered in the Shoah for Yad Vashem for the past decade. Dr. Haim Gertner, the director of Yad Vashem's archives division, told Haaretz last week that the team's work is revolutionary.

The figures speak for themselves. When the project began in 2007, Yad Vashem's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names held the names of 260,000, or around 43 percent, of some 600,000 Hungarian Jews murdered by the Nazis. The completed project added 225,000 names, such that over 80 percent of the Hungarian victims now have names.

"So far, we had the schedules of the transports and we knew when every train left Hungary for Auschwitz, from exactly where and with how many people," said Dr. Alexander Avram, the director of Yad Vashem's Hall of Names. "But we did not know who were the people on the trains."

The documentation they have found has made it possible to retell the stories of entire families, from which no one remained alive, added Gertner.

How was Yad Vashem able to complete the project? First, they needed to make major changes to their basic assumption that a single, unified and orderly list of all the Jews deported from Hungary exists. "For years we thought there was such a list. The moment we understood there was not, we stopped looking for it," said Gertner.

So instead of searching for the list, they began a no less difficult mission of compiling their own list by using a combination of meticulous archive searches and the most innovative technology available to process the information they discovered.

Some 20 local researchers were recruited in Hungary, Rumania and Serbia – because parts of the other two countries belonged to Hungary during World War II. "They searched about 20 archives for a decade, and turned page after page looking for documents that detailed the fate of Hungary's Jews in the Holocaust," said Avram.

Before starting their work, it was necessary to change Hungarian law to allow Yad Vashem unlimited access to the documents, some of which were personal. "In 2005, at the request of Yad Vashem, Hungary changed the law and allowed us to operate freely," said Gertner.

The work was divided into number of stages. The first stage was mapping and surveying all the potential sources across Hungary, from central government archives to those of small towns and Jewish communities. "The greatest challenge in this critical stage was to locate the relevant material because there is no special marking of materials related to the Holocaust or Jews in some of the archives," said Avram.

In the next stages, all the documents including the names of Jews preserved in all these archives were collected and copied. The names were hidden in correspondence and various records, for example the catalogue of Jews who were drafted into the work companies, the census conducted in Hungary, records of property confiscated from its Jewish owners and records of Jewish land owners.

Some of the documents were official papers from the Hungarian interior, defense and agriculture ministries. Other documents were found in the archives of local, sometimes extinct, Jewish communities. "In certain

cases, no one was left from the community but its archive survived in the house of one of the members' neighbors," said Avram.

Yad Vashem amassed some 168,000 files containing 2.5 million pages and listing 694,000 names of Jews. Then then needed to find out which Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, who survived, and who were already listed in Yad Vashem's database.

The Yad Vashem team used innovative technology that allowed it to manage the large amounts of data gathered from different sources in different formats and of varying quality. The key term was "big data," one of the hottest fields in high tech today. "Today, we know how to conduct smart and far-reaching searches with various partitioning and with an enormous amount of material, which in the past no one would have dreamed it was possible to do," said Gertner.

The 694,000 names were then entered directly into the Yad Vashem database, where the team processed the data, cross checking it and looking for duplicates, to identify the 225,000 new names.

One of them was Shmuel Lederer. His information was hiding in two different documents, preserved in different archives. One was his "labor service" card in Hungary, issued by the Hungarian Defense Ministry. The other document was found in a collection of Agriculture Ministry files, which dealt with confiscating land from Jews.

The Mendel family in Mukachevo, Hungary (now a part of Ukraine), 1939Yad Vashem's archives Studying the documents revealed not just Lederer's name but also the story of his life – and death. It turns out that along with his brother, he inherited 77 dunams (19.25 acres) of land. He also was an active participant in public life in his village and county. He served as the government-appointed village magistrate and as a member of the regional council.

In 1939, the second anti-Jewish law took effect in Hungary, which allowed the confiscation of the property of Jewish landowners. In 1941, the two Lederer brothers filed a complaint in the court in the nearby city of Pecs against the confiscation of their property. The complaint was of course rejected and the Agriculture Ministry issued the final decision on their property's confiscation in October 1942.

Shmuel Lederer and his wife Gizella were murdered in Auschwitz on May 28, 1944. They were but two of the 600,000 Hungarian Jews murdered by the Nazis, one-tenth of all the Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Lederer's name has now been added to the 4.7 million other names in Yad Vashem's online database of Holocaust victims. The exact number of Jewish Holocaust victims is unknown. "There is a very large argument since the 1960s among scholars, demographers and historians," said Avram. "The estimates vary from 5.1 million to 6.1 million. The majority opinion is close to 6 million."

"We are trying to reach 5 million [names]. Beyond that it is almost impossible," said Avram when asked about his goals. The reason a complete reckoning cannot be achieved is related to the lack of documentation of many of the acts of murder.

"Most of the names of those murdered in Central and Western Europe – like France, Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium – are known because there was documentation for them; in other places the situation is different," said Avram. "In the Soviet Union, Jews were murdered all over the place without any records. In most of the Polish ghettos, records were not preserved and the Jews were sent from there directly to extermination."

The project to gather the names of all Shoah victims started in 1954. For the first few decades it was conducted using "Pages of Testimony" filled out by survivors and the victims' families, which listed the victims' names and other details. Now the entire searchable database is available online, while new names can be added using online "Pages of Testimony."

New names are still being discovered through these pages, but Yad Vashem directs most of the resources in a different direction.

“The Names Recovery Project is continuing and will remain with us until the last name, but our work methods have changed,” said Gertner. “Today we are aided by technology to use the existing databases in a smart way and to retrieve details that we could not in the past,” he adds. The case of Hungary demonstrates this. The “new” names discovered during the Hungarian project did not come from pages of testimony but were simply waiting for decades for someone to come and extract the names from the archives gathering dust in Hungary and neighboring countries.

The project was carried out with the support of the French Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah. Yad Vashem is using the same model for other name gathering projects for Poland, where about 900,000 names of Jewish victims are still missing, the former Soviet Union and Balkan nations.

“This is the most successful project we are running in the field of Holocaust documentation. We hope to succeed similarly in [the other nations], too,” said Avner Shalev, Yad Vashem’s chairman.

Teens arrested in vandalism at Jewish cemetery in Romania

Jewish Telegraphic Agency, October 18, 2017

<https://www.jta.org/2017/10/18/news-opinion/world/teens-arrested-in-vandalism-at-jewish-cemetery-in-romania>

Police in Romania arrested three teenagers accused of destroying 10 headstones at a Jewish cemetery.

The incident occurred over the weekend, police said in a statement Monday about the arrests near the northern city of Reghin, located 200 miles north of Bucharest, the capital.

The suspects allegedly smashed the headstones and drew a swastika on two gates, though police said the swastikas may have been painted on the gates months ago, the Agepres news website reported.

On Monday, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania said it was “shocked by this new anti-Semitic act of vandalism.”

“We emphasize that such cases require serious investigation and stiff punishment, in accordance with the legal provisions in force, because lax treatment opens the door to more and more serious violations of democracy,” the federation’s president, Aurel Vainer, said in a statement.

“It is not a coincidence that this outrageous incident took place only a week after the national commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust in Romania.”

Earlier this month, authorities in neighboring Ukraine identified several teenagers whom police said desecrated at least 20 Jewish graves in August.

The teens, all males younger than 18, were detained last month in connection with vandalism in Svalyava, a city in Western Ukraine that is located approximately 100 miles southwest of Lviv, the news website reported.

The cemetery they allegedly vandalized has not been in use for decades.

A Trove of Yiddish Artifacts Rescued From the Nazis, and Oblivion

By Joseph Berger

New York Times, October 18, 2017

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/arts/a-trove-of-yiddish-artifacts-rescued-from-the-nazis-and-oblivion.html?_r=0

In one of their odder and more chilling moves, the Nazis occupying Lithuania once collected Yiddish and Hebrew books and documents, hoping to create a reference collection about a people they intended to annihilate.

Even stranger, they appointed Jewish intellectuals and poets to select the choicest pearls for study.

These workers, assigned to sift through a major Jewish library in Vilna, Vilnius in Lithuanian, ended up hiding thousands of books and papers from the Nazis, smuggling them out under their clothing, and squirreling them away in attics and underground bunkers.

In 1991, a large part of the collection was found in the basement of a Vilnius church, and were hailed as important artifacts of Jewish history.

But months ago curators at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Manhattan, the successor to the Vilnius library, were told that another trove, totaling 170,000 pages, had been found, somehow overlooked in the same church basement.

These documents, experts say, are even more valuable and compelling. Among the finds:

- Five dog-eared notebooks of poetry by Chaim Grade, considered along with Isaac Bashevis Singer as one of the leading Yiddish novelists of the mid-20th century.
- Two letters by Sholem Aleichem, the storyteller whose tales of Tevye the Milkman formed the core of “Fiddler on the Roof.”
- A postcard written by Marc Chagall, the Jewish modernist painter.

“These are gold,” said David E. Fishman, a professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who traveled to Vilnius in July at YIVO’s behest to assess the trove’s importance. He came back with the sort of enthusiasm one might find in an explorer who has just discovered unknown lands.

A selection of 10 items from the newly found literary manuscripts, letters, diaries, synagogue record books, theater posters and ephemera will go on display on Oct. 24 at YIVO headquarters on West 16th Street.

In interviews, Mr. Fishman and Jonathan Brent, YIVO’s executive director, discussed other findings, including, an early poem by Abraham Goldfaden, the father of the flourishing Yiddish theater in Europe and on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, and 10 poems handwritten in the Vilna ghetto by Abraham Sutzkever, among the greatest Yiddish poets. In one poem, Sutzkever expresses his fear that “Death is rushing, riding on a bullet-head/To tear apart in me my brightest dream.”

Mr. Brent and his staff said they were just as excited by more quotidian items like scripts of “Sherlock Holmes” and other popular entertainments that delighted prewar Jews and an astronomical guide with a set of dials to calculate when religious holidays should fall, given variations in the lengths of Jewish lunar months. A 1933 “autobiography” by a malnourished fifth grader, Bebe Epshtein, describes how her parents forced her to eat by telling her beguiling stories. When “I would open my mouth,” she wrote, “they would pour in food.”

Many of the items, the experts said, offer glimpses into the hardscrabble everyday lives of the Jews of Eastern Europe when the region, not Israel or the Lower East Side, was the center of the Jewish world.

Almost as intriguing as the cache is the serpentine story of the documents’ rescue and rediscovery, much of which had been known before but which has been updated with the new find.

When the Nazis occupied Lithuania from 1941 to 1944, they were determined to incinerate or grind up the country’s Jewish collections, particularly those at YIVO, which from 1925 to 1940 in Vilna was the world’s foremost library of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. With characteristic incongruity, though, they decided to save a third of the YIVO collection for a research center near Frankfurt that would study “the Jewish question” even if they planned to make sure the Jews would be extinct. (In Lithuania alone, 90 percent of the prewar Jewish population of 160,000 was murdered.)

They needed Yiddish speakers to analyze and select the materials, and deployed 40 ghetto residents like Sutzkever and another raffish poet, Shmerke Kaczerginski, as slave laborers. Risking death by a firing squad, this “paper brigade” rescued thousands of books and documents.

When the Germans were pushed out of Lithuania by the Soviets, survivors like Sutzkever spirited some hidden treasures to New York. (The Soviets frowned on anything evocative of ethnic or religious loyalties.) Meanwhile, a gentile librarian, Antanas Ulpis, who was assembling the remnants of the national library in a former church, St. George's, stashed stacks of Jewish materials in basement rooms to hide them from Stalin's enforcers. He is, as a result, regarded by YIVO as a kind of Oskar Schindler of document rescue.

The bulk of the basement collection — documents totaling 250,000 pages — was recovered after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Last year, the entire basement collection was transferred to the Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania, which had reopened in a grand colonnaded building, and in May officials there informed Mr. Brent, of the new trove of 170,000 documents. They had been stored in a separate church basement room and had never been evaluated because none of the assigned archivists could read Yiddish or Hebrew.

Lithuania has chosen to hold onto all the Jewish documents in the library's Judaica center as part of its national heritage. But it has allowed YIVO to digitize them for the use of the general public — and to have select items to display in Manhattan later this month.

"It's going to take decades for scholars to analyze all of this," said Mr. Fishman, who this month published "The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures From the Nazis."

Among the more mundane curiosities that were salvaged is a weathered agreement from 1857 between a yeshiva in Vilna and a union of water carriers.

What is a water carrier, a Talmud student might ask?

In Vilna at that time, water carriers were needed to deliver buckets of water to homes from available wells. The ragtag Jewish water carriers formed a guild, which promised to donate a Torah scroll and a set of Talmuds to the yeshiva if members were given a room of their own, rent-free, for worship.

The crew that rescued these records largely did not survive the war. Some 34 of the 40 people viewed by experts as having been members of the "paper brigade" died, according to Mr. Fishman, some in death camps like Treblinka or in labor camps or in more random fashion. Mr. Kaczerginski was killed in 1954 in a plane crash in the Andes. Sutzkever had an illustrious career as a poet in Israel and died at age 96 in 2010. Mr. Ulpis, who helped save the documents later found in the church basement, died in 1981.

Jeenbekov Wins Kyrgyz Presidential Election Outright, Preliminary Vote Count Shows Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 15, 2017

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-presidential-election-atambaev-babanov-sariev-jeenbekov/28794893.html>

Kyrgyz election officials say preliminary results from Kyrgyzstan's presidential vote indicate that Sooronbai Jeenbekov, a political ally of incumbent President Almazbek Atambaev, has won more than 54 percent of the vote, appearing to negate the need for a second-round runoff.

With 97 percent of the votes tallied, Jeenbekov's main rival, Omurbek Babanov, gained just short of 34 percent, the Central Election Commission (CEC) said on October 15. Preliminary figures showed voter turnout at just over 50 percent.

A total of 11 candidates, including one woman, were listed on the ballot to replace Atambaev, who is constitutionally barred from running for a second consecutive six-year term. The three leading contenders -- Babanov, Jeenbekov, and Temir Sariev -- were all prime ministers during Atambaev's term in office, raising expectations of policy continuity in a country that has to balance the often-competing interests between neighbors Russia and China.

Speaking shortly after the preliminary results were announced, Jeenbekov praised the country's "great achievements and developments in all sectors in the past six years," referring to Atambaev's term in office.

"My task is to preserve what has been achieved, to strengthen what has been started," Jeenbekov said.

Asked if he has thought about asking Babanov to join his team, Jeenbekov said he has "never had such intention."

Babanov is expected to speak to the media on October 16. While voting was still under way, Babanov said: "There is no fair election today.... Law enforcement authorities are interfering with the election. Is this what they call a fair election?"

A spokeswoman for Babanov was quoted by the AFP news agency as saying that they were conducting "a parallel count."

Barring any unrest, the vote would be the first peaceful transfer of power from one popularly elected president to another in Central Asia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

While dirty tricks, arrests, and the alleged abuse of the levers of power cast a pall over the campaign, a smooth election and orderly succession would bolster Kyrgyzstan's credentials as an island of democracy in the region's authoritarian sea.

"I am proud of my freedom-loving people who have staged two national revolutions against dictatorial regimes over the last 12 years and have proven that people are the only possible source of power in the Kyrgyz Republic," Atambaev said during the campaign.

Atambaev said that Kyrgyzstan had achieved peace and stability in recent years and claimed it is "the first and only country in post-Soviet Central Asia with a parliamentary democracy."

Having battled through two revolutions and several noisy election campaigns, the 6 million mainly Muslim citizens of this mountainous former Soviet republic have become an anomaly among the region's five ex-Soviet states: the most democratic country in a predominantly authoritarian region.

Jeenbekov, a 58-year-old political ally of Atambaev, used his political leverage and support from the incumbent to wage a heated battle with 47-year-old Babanov, a wealthy entrepreneur and former oil trader from the north.

Neither had been able to gain a strong upper hand, with a September poll by the Western-backed NGO Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society giving Jeenbekov 41 percent to about 39 percent for Babanov.

Amid concerns of potential unrest and political confrontation, Sariev, the other leading candidate, said that "there shouldn't be any tension" in the country after the election.

"The election must finish tonight," he said.

Atambaev said that the authorities have "jailed and will continue to jail" those planning unrest "so that they don't spoil our celebration."

"For elections in Kyrgyzstan, one must expect the unexpected," according to Michal Romanowski, an expert in Eurasian affairs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

"Citizens have proved to those in power that in the end they call the shots and authorities will be held accountable for their actions. The attitude promotes political pluralism and a substitute for real electoral competition," he said.

The campaign was littered with accusations of dirty tricks and outright corruption, underlying the instability that led to the ouster of two leaders through revolutions in 2005 and 2010.

Government critics said the campaign was marred by a criminal conviction handed down to opposition Ata-Meken (Fatherland) party leader Omurbek Tekebaev in August after a trial his backers say was politically motivated.

Meanwhile, the government accused Babanov of trying to buy votes and late last month detained one of his supporters, saying there were efforts to plot a coup during the election.

Babanov denied the accusations and in turn alleged the government has used "administrative resources" against his candidacy and in favor of Jeenbekov.

While Kyrgyzstan's key ally Russia has stayed neutral, neighboring Kazakhstan's autocratic President Nursultan Nazarbaev made a surprise appearance in the campaign in September by appearing to endorse Babanov.

That sparked a strong rebuke from Atambaev, who blasted Nazarbaev in a speech lauding his country's democratic principles and accusing Kazakhstan of being ruled by corrupt "sultans."

In a sign of building tensions and in a thinly veiled criticism of Babanov on October 13, Atambaev also called an unnamed leading contender in the elections a "flunky" of a foreign country.

Kazakhstan's government called the remarks "unacceptable" and introduced tighter controls this week on the Kyrgyz border, citing security concerns.