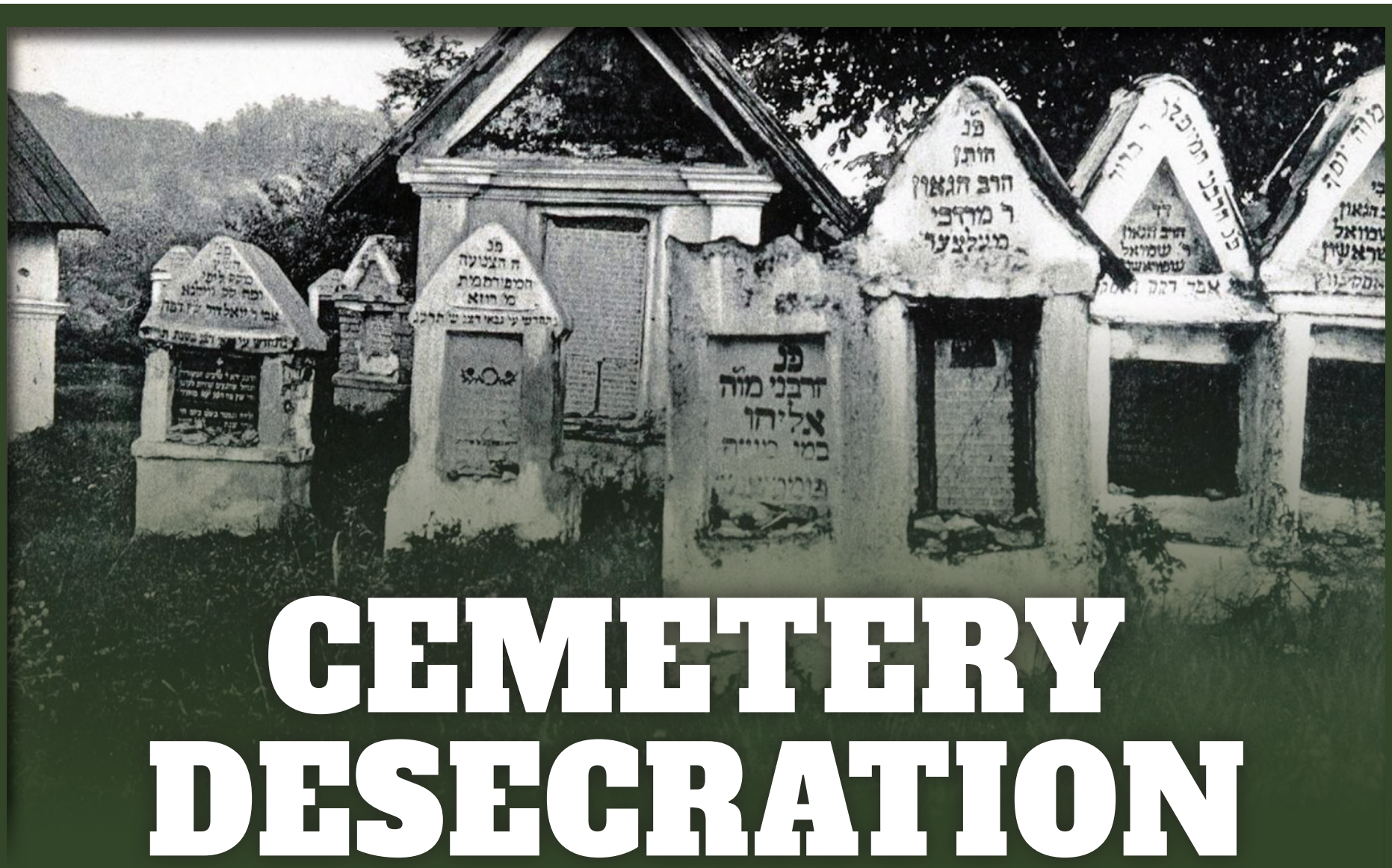


CEMETERY DESECRATION

Across Europe Awakens Ghosts of the Holocaust

Lithuania's government is considering a proposal from far-right anti-Semitic groups to convert Vilna's historic Jewish cemetery where generations of Lithuanian Jews are buried, to a conference venue and concert hall.

The proposal has sparked an intense backlash from Jewish organizations, human rights advocates and international figures including President Trump's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Rabbi Yehuda Kaploun.

The cemetery in Shnipishok (today the Snipiskes district of modern Vilnius), is considered one of Vilna's oldest Jewish burial grounds, dating back to the 15th century. Revered Torah scholars including Rav Moshe Rivkes, author of *Be'er Hagolah,* Rav Avrohom Danzig, author of *Chayei Adam* and Rav Yehoshua Heschel and many other luminaries are buried there.

The Vilna Gaon was originally interred in this *bais hachaim* but his remains together with his entire *ohel* were moved to another cemetery before the Soviets, who took control of Lithuania in 1940, could desecrate the site.

Soviet authorities intentionally destroyed tombstones and razed part of the cemetery lands, erecting a massive sports and entertainment complex in an attempt to erase the Jewish character of the region. The structure, abandoned since 2004, still stands in the heart of the cemetery.

The National Forum, a right-wing group that has consistently minimized the Holocaust and glorified as "resistance heroes" Lithuanian leaders who collaborated with the Nazis, has been organizing demonstrations calling for the cultural hall's renovation.

Efforts to develop the site have been underway for more than a decade, despite fierce opposition from the local Jewish community. In 2021, bowing to mounting protests, the government announced that it was shelving plans to transform the complex into a $25 million conference center.

But this May, the government reversed course, announcing that it intended to press ahead with the controversial construction plans.

Jewish organizations see Lithuanian schemes to uproot the cemetery as a drive to eliminate all evidence of the country's rich Jewish past.

This distortion mirrors efforts of anti-Semitic groups to revise Lithuania's Holocaust history; they deny the country's role in the annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry, trivialize the terrible slaughter, and ludicrously claim victimhood for their countrymen who they say faced "genocide" from "Jewish Bolsheviks" during the war.

Stark Warning to Lithuania's Government



JHL
JEWISH HERITAGE IN LITA
ŽYDŲ PAVELDAS LITE

Tuesday, September 1, 2026

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President Donald J. Trump
White House

Dear Mr. President,

We turn to you as the undisputed leader of the free world. With your unwavering support for human rights, and by waging war on antisemitism, you are showing humanity the necessity of placing the values of truth and compassion above all.

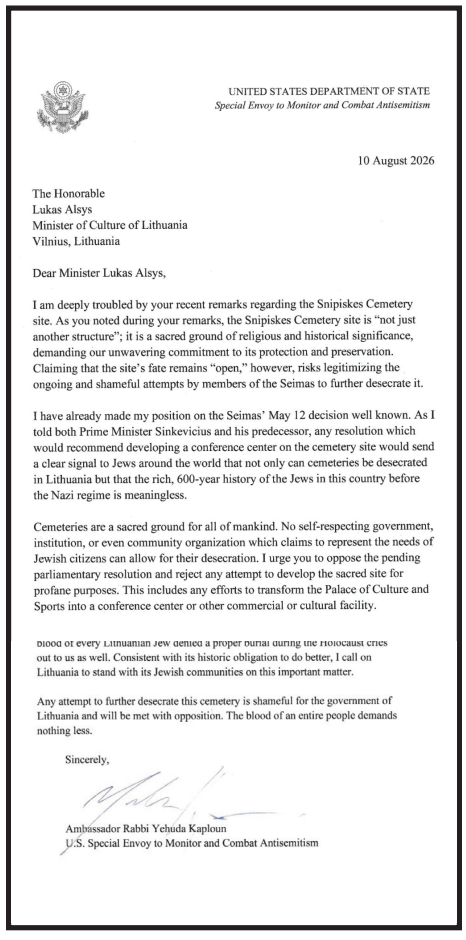
Mr. President, we approach you with an urgent matter, central to our faith as spiritual heirs of the great Lithuanian Jewish legacy - the desecration of the historic Vilnius Shnipishok Jewish cemetery, partially desecrated by the Soviet regime with a brutal sports building. There are continuous attempts by unscrupulous groups in Lithuania to develop the defunct and abandoned structure. We respectfully request that you ask the Lithuanian authorities to immediately return the entire cemetery to our community, including the structure, for respectful restoration in conjunction with the Vilnius Municipality as an historic Jewish cemetery once again.

Mr. President, we are deeply thankful for all the amazing and momentous accomplishments you have brought about with great integrity, many of them unpopular. By firmly placing all the power invested in you on the side of righteousness, you have inspired good people everywhere to believe in the inherent goodness of mankind.

Respectfully yours,

Rabbi Elchonon Baron, Jack Lyon and Rabbi Eliyahu M. Cohen
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism

10 August 2026

The Honorable
Lukas Alsys
Minister of Culture of Lithuania
Vilnius, Lithuania

Dear Minister Lukas Alsys,

I am deeply troubled by your recent remarks regarding the Snipiskes Cemetery site. As you noted during your remarks, the Snipiskes Cemetery site is "not just another structure"; it is a sacred ground of religious and historical significance, demanding our unwavering commitment to its protection and preservation. Claiming that the site's fate remains "open," however, risks legitimizing the ongoing and shameful attempts by members of the Seimas to further desecrate it.

I have already made my position on the Seimas' May 12 decision well known. As I told both Prime Minister Sinkevicius and his predecessor, any resolution which would recommend developing a conference center on the cemetery site would send a clear signal to Jews around the world that not only can cemeteries be desecrated in Lithuania but that the rich, 600-year history of the Jews in this country before the Nazi regime is meaningless.

Cemeteries are a sacred ground for all of mankind. No self-respecting government, institution, or even community organization which claims to represent the needs of Jewish citizens can allow for their desecration. I urge you to oppose the pending parliamentary resolution and reject any attempt to develop the sacred site for profane purposes. This includes any efforts to transform the Palace of Culture and Sports into a conference center or other commercial or cultural facility.

Blood of every Lithuanian Jew denied a proper burial during the Holocaust cries out to us as well. Consistent with its historic obligation to do better, I call on Lithuania to stand with its Jewish communities on this important matter.

Any attempt to further desecrate this cemetery is shameful for the government of Lithuania and will be met with opposition. The blood of an entire people demands nothing less.

Sincerely,

Ambassador Rabbi Yehuda Kaploun
U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism

YOM KIPPUR NIGHT

A handful of prisoners were either too ill or weak to crawl through the narrow tunnel or feared Nazi retribution if the plot was caught early. When the mass breakout occurred, those who stayed behind quickly erected a false wall inside the barracks and hid behind it for three days.

"It was the night of Yom Kippur, after midnight," writes Eliyohu Berkovitz, who had chosen to stay behind to take care of his ill sister. "After three days of hiding with nothing to eat or drink, the four of us decided to leave our hiding place and make our way toward the forest in search of the partisans. We couldn't survive there much longer."

"We came down one by one and found a hole in the fence where the police used to barter with the ghetto inmates, supplying them with food in exchange for valuables. We carried my sister who was too ill to walk."

Somehow the group of four made it to the Sieniezyc Forest, dragging themselves deep into the thick woods for about three miles. They wandered for eight days, searching fruitlessly for signs of the Bielski camp. Famished and exhausted, they were at the end of their endurance when they encountered a Jewish partisan.

Their relief was indescribable.

The partisan brought them to the Bielski camp where they were given food and drink. To their immeasurable joy, they found their friends from the Novaradok ghetto. About 170 had survived.

The former prisoners took shelter with the Bielskis for 10 months, until the Soviets liberated the region. "We were often hungry," Berkovits writes in his memoir, "as there were over a thousand people to feed in the camp. But what did that matter? *We were alive! Among Jews!"*

In a powerful letter, U.S. Special Envoy Rabbi Kaploun warned the Lithuanian government against reviving plans to perpetuate the desecration of the cemetery.

Rabbi Kaploun stressed that everyone recognizes that the Vilna cemetery is not just another piece of property but a place of religious and historical significance that requires protection and preservation.

"Any decision recommending the development of a conference center on the cemetery grounds will send a clear message to Jews around the world, not only that cemeteries may be desecrated, but that the rich, 600-year history of the country's Jews before the Nazi regime is meaningless," Kaploun wrote.

"A cemetery is sacred ground to all human beings," he added. "No government, institution or even communal organization claiming to represent the needs of Jewish citizens can permit its desecration."

"I urge you to oppose the pending parliamentary resolution and reject any attempt to develop the sacred site for profane purposes. This includes any efforts to transform the Palace of Culture and Sports into a conference center or other commercial or cultural facility," the letter continued.

Rabbi Kaploun ended on a blistering note, invoking the extermination of Lithuanian Jewry during the Holocaust when 96 per cent of the Jewish population was murdered.

"'G-d told Cain: 'Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the earth,'" he wrote. "Now, the blood of every Lithuanian Jew denied a proper burial during the Holocaust cries out to us as well.

"Any attempt to continue desecrating this cemetery is a disgrace to the Lithuanian government and will be met with opposition," the letter warned. "The blood of an entire people demands nothing less."

'It was after midnight, the night of Yom Kippur. After three days of hiding, the four of us decided to leave our hiding place and make our way toward the forest in search of the partisans...We knew we couldn't survive here much longer.'

Turning a Mass Crime Site into a Tourist Attraction

Amid the global surge in anti-Semitism, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries is by no means confined to Lithuania. Across Europe—from Spain, Belgium, France and Germany in the West to Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe—Jewish burial grounds have been vandalized and destroyed, with swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti often defacing headstones.

Yet cemetery desecration is not always so blatant. At times, it proceeds more quietly, cloaked in bureaucratic procedures and legal justifications as in Vilna, and as shown below, in the town of Novaradok (spelled Novagrudok in the local dialect).

Currently, some of the loudest protests over cemetery desecration have come from this region in Belarus. City officials there sold the site of the Holocaust-era labor camp and an astounding escape tunnel to a private developer who plans to build a theme park and hotel on the site.

Descendants of survivors of the Novaradok ghetto and forced labor camp in Belarus, along with Jewish organizations and Holocaust remembrance groups, have expressed deep shock over this transaction, which violated a previous agreement the Jewish community had brokered with the city just a year ago.

In 2025, the mayor of Novaradok and representatives of the Jewish Religious Union in Belarus signed an agreement to establish a museum at the former ghetto site—one dedicated to preserving the memory of the Jews who suffered and died there while safeguarding the site's sacred character.

However, in May this year it emerged that the property had been sold at a municipal auction to Belarusian American businessman Andrei Zapolski. According to a report published by Jewish News, the sale was completed in less than a minute and without competing bidders, allegedly without the knowledge of the organizations that signed the 2025 agreement or the descendants of the survivors.

Money-making Mannequins

According to published reports, the new plan includes the construction of an "immersive" visitor complex that would feature life-like mannequins, barbed-wire fences, fake barking dogs, workshops simulating the lives of prisoners, and a reconstruction of the escape tunnel as part of a visitor route.

In addition, one of the buildings once used for Jewish forced labor would be converted into a hotel for visitors seeking a "full experience."

The move has sparked fierce opposition among survivors' families, who launched a petition signed by most descendant families. The petition argues that turning a mass crime site and an unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe into a money-making tourist attraction would constitute "a flagrant and unbearable desecration of the victims' memory."

"The camp and the surrounding buildings are not merely historical sites for us," family members wrote. "They are the last places that connect us to our parents and grandparents, to those who were murdered and those who fought for their lives. For us, this is a sacred place, soaked in the blood of our family members."

To turn a site of torture, murder and unimaginable human suffering into a commercialized, hands-on tourist experience is not merely questionable—it is a profound moral failure, the petition said.

There is a line between education and money-making exploitation, critics note. For many descendants of Holocaust survivors, turning atrocity into an attraction crosses that line beyond any doubt.

Critics also fear the museum's exhibits, far from evoking sympathy from Lithuanian visitors, would only fuel anti-Semitism, planting sinister ideas in evil minds.

The Belarus municipal authorities, choosing to wait until the furor dies down, recently announced it would wait until later in the fall to reach a decision about the cemetery's future.

Will this ground remain a place of remembrance and prayer for the souls of the slain—or become another casualty of the commercialization of Holocaust memory?

After the war, young Jack Kagan emigrated to England, married in 1955 and became a prosperous businessman. He never forgot the harrowing time he spent in the Novaradok ghetto and the astounding escape through a tunnel he had helped to dig while crippled.

In the 1990s, he returned to the town, determined to locate the site of the first massacre site where 5,200 Jews had been gunned down. After much searching, he found it.

He obtained permission from the authorities to fence off the area and erected a memorial to honor the memories of family members and fellow townspeople slain by the Nazis. Amid the searing pain, he felt privileged to fulfill a private pledge he had made when he was a young boy, frantically limping his way to freedom.

Many years later, Kagan and a few other elderly survivors together with 55 children and grandchildren, returned to Novaradok for the filming of a documentary about the tunnel that took them to safety.

Part of the group's mission was to find and excavate the tunnel using their bare hands and simple tools, as their grandparents had done 70 years ago during the dark days of the Holocaust. The film, *Tunnel of Hope*, based on the work of Dr. Betty Brodsky Cohen, a daughter of one of the tunnel escapees, recounts this riveting story.

Beneath the Novaradok Ghetto, A Desperate Bid for Freedom

Witness to History

Novaradok was a Polish town with a population of about 12,000 before the war, half of whom were Jews. The peaceful ambience of the Jewish part of town changed drastically when the Nazis arrived in 1941.

In one massacre after another, they gunned down Novaradok's Jews together with thousands of Jews from other towns who had been crammed into the ghetto.

The victims—including some wounded but still alive—were thrown into trenches whose dirt-covered surface continued to heave for days with the death throes of those buried underneath.

By May of 1943, only 500 Jews remained in Novaradok. The Nazis confined these people in the city's courthouse, surrounded by fences and barbed wire. They had been spared thus far for their skills.

Each morning the ghetto gates would open and tailors, shoemakers, metalworkers, carpenters and mechanics were ushered under gunpoint to their workshops to sew fur linings into boots, manufacture guns, or mend German army uniforms.

On May 7, 1943, the Nazis conducted another massacre, first summoning half of the Jews into a courtyard and setting a trap with a brazen lie. They told those assembled that as superior workers, they would be getting more food rations and would be sent to a better place to work.

After lulling the victims into compliance, the Nazis swiftly encircled them and machine-gunned them to death.

The slaughter took place in view of the horrified ghetto. Following this atrocity, the remaining 250 Jews gave up their last hopes of being spared. In desperation, knowing they were doomed, they began plotting their escape.

About 240 prisoners spent nearly three and a half months digging a tunnel roughly 650 feet long beneath the camp's fences. In a spectacular breakout, the prisoners escaped through the tunnel frantically trying to dodge a massive hail of bullets from Nazi guards.

Berel Yoselevitch, a carpenter, proposed digging a passage from under a bed located along the northern barracks wall, closest to the outer walls of the ghetto and the woods. The tunnel would drop four and a half feet, then run north under the ghetto to a field next to the forest for about 700 feet. The weak and injured wouldn't have to run fast or fight, he argued. They would hide themselves when everyone else left.

Once out, the Jews would join the famed Bielski partisans.

"In the ghetto," recalled survivor Leah Johnson," we heard about a man named Tuvia Bielski who wanted Jews to join him in the forest. Young, old, sick, healthy…it didn't matter. As long as you were a Jew, you were welcome."

As Soviet partisan groups in the region proliferated, inflicting significant damage on the Nazis, the Germans mounted several massive raids, using tanks, planes and immense firepower to wipe out the guerilla fighters. In Operation Hermann, they succeeded in killing or crippling a large number of partisan groups.

But they were never able to capture or destroy the Bielski Brigade and the Jews they protected in the forest.

Hope Kindled in the Shadow of Death

It seemed the stuff of fantasy but the tunnel escape plan kindled hope in people's hearts and many wanted to begin digging immediately.

The work was difficult and dangerous, performed with bits of metal shaped into digging tools, blankets sewn into dirt-removal bags, and wood stolen from the workshops to prop up the tunnel's walls.

Much of the tunnel was dug by children and men of slight build, who could maneuver within its narrow walls. The children dug while lying down, stomachs pressed against the earth. In order not to soil their only clothing and arouse suspicion, they dug without clothing or wore robes of burlap sacks or old cloth sewn especially for the task.

A daring electrician, Gershon Rakovski, diverted a current from the ghetto and strung electric bulbs along the tunnel ceiling. He also figured out how to disconnect the searchlights that lit up the ghetto grounds. Occasionally he would dim or momentarily turn off the lights, so the Germans would get used to these "shortages" and not suspect anything when one took place on the night of the escape.

By July 1943, the tunnel was about 240 feet long and near completion. But rainy weather soaked the ground and the tunnel seemed in danger of collapsing. To remedy the problem, Berel Yoselevitch stole wood slats from his workshop to reinforce the walls and ceiling. He also organized the digging of small drains and channels in the floor to divert water.

They tunnel's organizers decided to leave the digging of the actual exit until the night of the escape.

A Secret Ballot

Novaradok survivor Eliyohu Berkovitz described the drama of the tunnel escape in his memoirs, translated from the Yiddish original.

"In the beginning of September 1943, the tunnel was 340 feet long. News began to circulate that the ghetto was going to be liquidated and the town would be made *Judenrein.* That drove us to move up the time for the escape.

"We broke the news about the tunnel to everyone in the ghetto. It created a sensation. Enormous surprise, mostly happiness. There were also voices of dissent. Some expressed doubt about the possibility of pulling off an escape under the Germans' noses. Others feared we would be trapped alive in the tunnel. Yet others thought that "we should wait and see." Maybe Hashem would save us at the last minute.

"An agreement was reached to conduct a secret ballot and we would all follow the will of the majority. The result of the ballot was 165 votes for an escape attempt and 65 against. So, it was decided to go ahead with the breakout and pray G-d would help us."

The small supply of arms was divided in two: half to those who would guard the exit the other half to those that would guard the entrance.

A Tunnel, a Storm, and the Race for Life

On September 26, 1943, about 8 p.m., Rakovski, the electrician, cut power to the ghetto searchlights and turned on the tunnel lights. It was raining heavily. Nails in the barracks' tin roof were loosened, allowing sheets of tin to clank in the wind, amplifying the noise of the storm so sounds of the escaping Jews would be drowned out.

The people quietly assembled, waiting in the darkness for their turn to lower themselves into the lighted earth. They encouraged one another and exchanged prayers.

"We crawled as quickly as could through the dirt, our hearts pounding so hard we could hardly breathe" Sonia Gorodinsky recalled.

'G-d, please let me go through,' I prayed. Every movement I made, I was sure the earth would collapse and bury me alive."

Then disaster struck.

Emerging at the tunnel exit, the Jews couldn't see through the darkness and pouring rain. Dozens became disoriented and ran back to the ghetto instead of toward the forest. Many were shot by guards who thought partisans were ambushing them. Among the slain was Berel Yoselevitch, the tunnel's mastermind.

"I was one of the last out," recalled Jack Kagan, who was 13 at the time. Having lost all 10 toes to frostbite in a failed attempt to escape, he was recovering from their amputation (by a dentist using clippers without anesthetic) when he overheard the adults formulate the escape plan. Despite his disability, he refused to stay behind.

"When I crawled out, there was already machine gun fire from the watchtowers. The searchlight was cut off. It was raining. It was black. You couldn't see your own hand in front of your face. We ran blindly."

Of the 240 escapees that night, the majority survived the breakout, Kagan among them. In an interview many years later, he recalled being found in the woods by a Bielski partisan who escorted him to the camp.

"When I saw the Bielski brothers, Tuvia and Zushe, there was a joy in my heart. I felt there was hope…I felt something like heavenly protection was still possible in a world gone mad."