

Address at the inauguration of the LSMU University Emmanuel Levinas Center

It is with great emotion that I address you tonight, the emotion of the great days when we celebrate, in his native city, Emmanuel Levinas.

Born here in 1906, Emmanuel Levinas, the Litvak, went to France, in 1923, as a young Lithuanian student in Strasbourg. He became one of the greatest French philosophers of the twentieth century and the greatest Jewish thinker since, Maimonides the 12th century philosopher.

Emmanuel Levinas passed away on the eighth day of the celebration of Hannuka, 26 years ago to the day, according to the Jewish calendar.

Levinas's works are now translated into more than 20 languages, including Lithuanian. His thought is studied all around the world.

One must not separate Emmanuel from his wife, Raïssa. Raïssa and Emmanuel got married here on 9 September 1932. "The true intellectual of the family", she practiced Emmanuel's philosophy long before Emmanuel wrote it down, just as according to a midrash, the Matriarchs practiced the Sinai law long before the Sinai revelation.

The Jews of Kaunas and Kovno, who brought so much to human knowledge and universal culture, were almost completely exterminated during the Shoah. Among them were my great-grandfather, Yehiel Levinas, and my great-uncles, Emmanuel's two brothers, Boris-Dov and Aminadav. It is very likely that they were taken from their home and shot at Fort VII, perhaps during the massacres perpetrated by the Lithuanian Auxiliary Police on July 4 and 6, 1941. Dvora, née Gurevich, Levinas's mother, died about six months later in the Kaunas Ghetto under unknown circumstances.

Among the very few survivors of the family were Emmanuel's aunt, Fruma Gurevich, and her daughter, Bella. Bella, Emmanuel's cousin, was saved thanks to the courage of a Lithuanian woman. This woman hid her in her home at the risk of her life. This woman, whom I did not know, was Dr. Ona Jablonskytė-Landsbergienė. Prof. Vytautas Landsbergis, you know her - she was your mother.

In two of his masterworks, in *Totality and Infinity* and in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas initiated a Copernican revolution that changed the course of the history of philosophy. This revolution is that responsibility toward the other precedes freedom and NOT the other way around and that this responsibility constitutes the ultimate meaning of human subjectivity.

Between 1939 and 1945, leaders, heads of families, elected officials of various levels, community or ghetto leaders, endured their condition as hostages. Without compensation and without seeking an escape, they were *responsible*, "for everything and everyone", according to the Levinasian expression, "pour tout et pour tous".

It is true that their fate ended in death, in the concentration or extermination camps. But thanks to them, who knew how to face up to the paroxysm of the inhuman, the ultimate

meaning of the human being, , the” for-the-other”, le “pour-l’autre”, remained unconquered.

The Emmanuel Levinas Centre we are inaugurating tonight is the realization of a shared Franco-Lithuanian vision that united back in 2018 ambassador Philippe Jeantaud, LSMU rector and French honorary consul Pr. Remigijus Zaliunas, Kaunas mayor Visvaldas Matijosaitis and Prime minister Saulius Skvernelis, who made everything possible. It celebrates the life and work of Emmanuel Levinas. As such, it celebrates the Jewish community of Kaunas and all the Litvaks. It is a memorial to the victims of antisemitism and National Socialism in Lithuania. It honors the 915 "Righteous among the Nations" from Lithuania, like Dr. Ona Jablonskytė-Landsbergienė, who realized, in the more concrete way, Levinas’s philosophy. They were ready for the ultimate sacrifice, to support, hide, and save Jews with determination and courage.

Thanks to the tremendous generosity of the Kaunas municipality and of the Lithuanian University of Health Science, the center is hosted in a building historically associated with France. The French consulate and the chancellery of the French Embassy operated here during the interwar period. Levinas was very proud of his identity, Jewish-French and Litvak from Lithuania. There would not have been a better place than this building to host the LSMU university Emmanuel Levinas Center.

Dear Rector Professor Rimantas Benetis, as my mother Simone Hansel, née Levinas wrote to you:

And these are her words:

“That this center was established at your university is particularly significant. In the last few years, and especially during the COVID pandemic, the implication of my father’s philosophy in medical ethics has been an active domain in Levinas studies. It has also been of particular meaning to me. I am a pediatrician and I owe that to the encouragement of my late parents who considered medicine to be the noblest of all disciplines.”

In the name of my mother, and of all my family, I deeply thank all those who have worked hard to make this inauguration possible, and in particular, you, dear Ingrida.

And paraphrasing Levinas, I will conclude, “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to thank you”.

David Hansel
6th December 2021,
Kaunas, Lithuania