

Address in Kaunas at the official opening of “Levinas in Kaunas”

Minister of Culture

Ambassadors

Rector of The University of Health Sciences

Chancellor of The University of Health Sciences

Elected President of the Conseil représentatif des Institutions juives de France

Chairwoman of Lithuanian Jewish Community

Papa et maman,

Participants in “Levinas in Kaunas” in person and remotely

Ladies and gentlemen,

‘Levinas in Kaunas’, which we are officially opening tonight, is a unique event in many aspects.

The international conference “The young Levinas: from solitude to alterity” takes place here until Thursday noon. It is the first conference ever, fully dedicated to the philosophy of the young Levinas. Levinas before his discovery of the other person with whom I am in an asymmetric relationship, Levinas before the infinite responsibility which precedes freedom. In other words, Levinas before the well-known Levinas of the Ethics.

Later in the week, the workshop “Ethical perspectives of Health Care” will deal with a very concrete application of Levinas’ Ethics. More than 200 participants, students as well as professional health practitioners, are registered.

Rector Prof. Rimentas Benetis and Chancellor Prof. Daiva Rastenyte, your teams had to work in particularly difficult conditions. Because of the uncertainty of the sanitary situation, they had less than four months to make of a dream a reality. This would not have been possible without their professionalism and your support. In the name of all the participants, thank you.

‘Levinas in Kaunas’ is also unique by its venue which has no equivalent in the world. Inaugurated last December, the LSMU Emmanuel Levinas Center 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.

The house where Levinas grew up is a few hundred meters away from here. The young Emmanuel left it twice. With all his family, he spent the first World War, in Ukraine, in Kharkov.

A few years later, in 1923, Levinas left Kaunas to study at the university of Strasbourg. This was the beginning of a journey at the end of which, he would be one of the greatest French philosophers of the twentieth century and the greatest Jewish thinker since the 12th century philosopher, Maimonides.

His teachers in Strasbourg were the most prominent French philosophers of the time. In Germany, in Freiburg, he discovered Husserl and Heidegger and became their main introducer in France. He was just 24. He met his fellow student Maurice Blanchot, who soon became his lifelong friend. Blanchot would later save Levinas' wife, Raissa, and their daughter, Simonne, from an almost certain deportation. Blanchot became a famous writer and literature critic. Levinas and Blanchot maintained an intense personal and intellectual relationship all their life. Their works have a singular resonance.

French citizen in 1930, Levinas frequently came back to Kaunas until WWII broke out. After a visit in 1934 he wrote¹ *“The development of the French language in the country, and especially in Kaunas, has recently taken on a new momentum. French newspapers are sold on every street corner, the latest works of French novelists, philosophers and historians are sought after and appreciated [...] The role of Jewish youth is considerable in this respect”*. Later Levinas would say² *“I often thought at the beginning of the 1939 war that we were fighting a war to defend French! It sounds like a joke, but I was thinking seriously: it is in this language that I feel the juices of the soil”*.

Isn't it the role of the Emmanuel Levinas Center to participate in the return of the French language and French Culture in Lithuania, to be an Embassy of the French spirit in Kaunas? My answer is: “obviously yes”.

Levinas said many times “my life has passed between the presentiment of Hitlerism and the memory of the Nazi horror”. In his sole article in Lithuanian, in 1933, and one year later in “Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism” he analyses what Hitlerism is all about. Although one of the first French intellectuals to have a profound understanding of what was happening in Germany, could Levinas imagine the extermination of 6 million European Jews, including 97% of the Lithuanian Jews? Could he imagine that antisemitic Lithuanians in Kaunas would go on wild killing sprees directed against the Jews during the first days of the Nazi invasion? Thousands of Jews were transferred to locations outside the city, including the Seventh Fort. The Jews brought there were brutally abused and then shot by Lithuanians and Germans. In all, some 10,000 Kaunas Jews were murdered within the first six weeks of the German invasion. Among them, Yekhiel and Dvora, Emmanuel's parents, and Aminadav and Boris his brothers. By the end of 1941, 80% of the Jews of Kaunas had already been murdered.

¹ “Le développement de la langue française dans le pays et surtout à Kaunas a pris depuis quelques temps un essor nouveau. Les journaux français sont vendus à tous les coins de rue, les plus récents ouvrages des romanciers, philosophes et historiens français sont recherchés et appréciés [...] Le rôle de la jeunesse juive est considérable à cet égard”.

² “J'ai souvent pensé au début de la guerre de 1939 que l'on fait la guerre pour défendre le français ! Cela a l'air d'une boutade, mais je pensais sérieusement : c'est dans cette langue que je sens les sucs du sol”

Back in Paris after 5 years of captivity as French prisoner of war, Levinas played a key role in the reconstruction of the Jewish community. He contributed to it in many aspects including Jewish education, flourishing of the intellectual life and renewal of the dialog between Jews and Christian.

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*, according to the Levinassian expression, “*for everything and everyone*”, “*pour tout et pour tous*”. Thanks to them, who knew how to face up to the paroxysm of the inhuman, the Levinassian “*for-the-other*”, le “*pour-l’autre*”; the ultimate meaning of being human remained unconquered. Levinas is in Kaunas to tell us with Maurice Blanchot³ : ‘*Thanks to Emmanuel, I overcame the horror, I went beyond the “there is” and found in responsibility for others the supreme requirement*’.

Intellectuals and statesmen, such as Vaclav Havel or Jorge Semprun, have testified to their affinity with Levinas' thought. Semprun discovered Levinas in the 1930's, when he was a very young student, in Paris. Havel read Levinas in prison in the 1980's. The beautiful philosophical developments in Havel's Letters to Olga, his wife, manifest a deep connection with Levinas' philosophy.

Levinas was European. He was the heir to four cultures – Litvak, Russian, German and French. He was able to bring together universes as different as the Western philosophical tradition, Russian and European literature, and the Hebrew thought of the Talmud. “I awoke one morning and I knew I was a European”, Levinas wrote in a dedication - dated July 14, 1947 - of a book to his teacher from Kaunas, Moshe Schwabe who settled in Israel before WWII. However, unlike many Western philosophers and even his mentor Husserl, Levinas was convinced that Europe was not only Athens. As he liked to say, “Europe is the Bible and the Greeks”!

At a time when Europe is going through one of its worst military, political and identity crises since WWII, Levinas' work, in all its aspects, is more than ever relevant, now and here. That is why, for the whole week, Levinas is in Kaunas.

Dear Ingrida Krauseskiene, your dedication, your enthusiasm and your creativity are unique. With your sense of responsibility, your sense of humor and your hospitality, you are a true Levinassian. Thanks to your person, also, Levinas is in Kaunas.

David Hansel
Kaunas, July 5, 2022

³ “Grâce à Emmanuel Levinas, j’ai surmonté l’horreur, j’ai dépassé ‘il y a’ et trouvé dans la responsabilité pour autrui l’exigence suprême’. Message à Salomon Malka, Janvier 1996.