The Museum of Genocide Victims was established quite recently, in 1992. Therefore I think it would be useful to tell you a bit more about its history and main activities.

Seventy years ago, on the 15th of June, 1940, the Soviet Union occupied the Republic of Lithuania. By so doing the Soviet Union violated several international treaties – the Soviet–Lithuanian Peace Treaty signed on July 12, 1920, the Soviet–Lithuanian Non-aggression Pact signed on September 28, 1926 and the Soviet–Lithuanian Mutual Assistance Treaty signed on October 10, 1939. The Soviet Union occupied the Republic of Lithuania on the basis of secret agreements with Nazi Germany, that is on the additional protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in 1939.

For fifty years, Lithuania was erased from the political map of the world. The occupational force brutally destroyed the prevailing European social order, crushed human rights and humane values. Despite the repressions of the Soviet regime, Lithuanians fought for the restoration of independence. They started an armed partisan resistance that lasted for nine years (from 1944 to 1953). Later on, the dissident movement started. The Catholic Church also joined the fight and tried to protect the rights of religious people. Thanks to favourable circumstances a movement for national rebirth began in the end of 1980s. It was called “the Singing Revolution” and in 1990 it culminated in the restoration of the independent State.

After the building, where repressions were carried out during the whole of the occupation period, was vacated by KGB officers, there were a lot of discussions on the future of the building. Having considered public opinion it was decided to establish a museum in the former KGB headquarters that would serve to remind people of the Soviet occupation and genocide and thereby honour the victims of the
regime. Thus in 1992 the Museum of Genocide Victims was founded. Its main task is to collect, keep, investigate and disseminate historical documentary materials that testify to the crimes of the Soviet regime. The most important part of the exhibition in the museum is the former Soviet prison which was installed in the basement of the building in the autumn of 1940. The prison operated until August, 1991. Other floors house modern exhibitions that were arranged between 2000 and 2007. They tell the story of the loss of independence in the middle of the 20th century, the Soviet repressions and the selfless and persevering fight for independence. One of the exhibitions covers the fight for human rights and for the rights of religious people in occupied Lithuania.

As the aforementioned facts show, it took many years to collect the materials and organise different exhibitions. It was only when the exhibitions had been installed that further possibilities for other activities opened up. The Museum hosts various events and projects and is looking for new activities. We don’t want to be limited only to the history of Lithuania. For the last few years we have been cooperating with minorities living in Lithuania. The Museum has organised exhibitions on the Armenian genocide, the Ukrainian famine (Holodomor) and others.

What is more, the Museum is also concerned with recent and current events. For example, on March 31, 2009 the Museum hosted a commemoration of the Azerbaijani genocide, which was initiated by the Lithuanian Community of Azerbaijan. During the commemoration we recalled the four waves of genocide that the Azerbaijani nation suffered in less than a century. The last genocide took place between 1988 and 1994 in the Highland Karabakh. People are still coping with its painful aftermaths. This military conflict caused a lot of damage, war crimes and human rights’ violations. However, these events are not widely known in Lithuania. That is the reason why the commemoration that took place in the Museum attracted Lithuanian members of parliament, public figures, members of various ethnic communities, foreign diplomats and received a lot of media attention. The historical announcement, read during the event, was very favourably received and afterwards it was published in a magazine called “Genocide and Resistance” and other media.

The Museum also maintains friendly contacts with the representatives of another Caucasian nation, the Chechnians. As Lithuania itself has recently fought for its independence, it recognises and supports the Chechnians who are striving for their freedom. Not by chance in 2000, a square in Vilnius was named after the first
Itchkerian president Dzhokhar Dudayev. The Museum first spoke about Chechnya and the human rights' violations there in December, 2009, during preparations for International Human Rights' Day. It was decided to organise an event that would reflect the situation of human rights in a couple of countries, including Chechnya.

The event called “The Human Rights’ Situation in Belarus, Chechnya and Tibet” took place in the Museum’s branch, in the Memorial Complex of Tuskulėnai Peace Park. With the help of Belarusian, Chechnian and Tibetan freedom supporters, photo stands and video stories about human rights’ infringements and the fights against them were prepared. Unfortunately, violations of human rights are the common links that unite these completely different and geographically distant countries. The presentation about Chechnya was probably the most outstanding, because it was about war crimes and crimes against humanity commited by Russian military forces. The situation in Tibet, which is occupied by China, and that of independent Belarus is rather similar because in both countries democracy and fundamental human rights are abused. The objectors of the regimes are handled by brutal force or other cruel means. The aim of the event was to present the problem in a wider context, to involve participants, representatives of ethnic minorities, members of public organisations and the Lithuanian Parliament in the discussion. It is worth mentioning that this wasn’t the first time when Tibetan issues were raised in the Museum. As recently as December, 2008, the Museum hosted an event called “The Political and Cultural Situation in Tibet”. It was initiated by supporters of the Tibetan Freedom Movement. During the event a documentary was shown and impressions from the Dalai Lama’s lecture in Warsaw were shared. We firmly believe that the cooperation with supporters of the Tibetan freedom movement will continue in the future too.

It is important to say that the Museum maintains the closest relations with the members of the Belarusian community. This is not surprising as Belarus is Lithuania’s neighbour. These two nations that have lived side by side for centuries are different but they are also similar in many ways. For example, when the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse, Belarus also established an independent state. Unfortunately, Belarus chose a different path to Lithuania. Quite a few political and public figures who had been persecuted in Belarus found refuge in Lithuania. Lithuania’s capital Vilnius is home to the Belarusian university in exile – the European Humanities University. The University has many young and enthusiastic students who have formed a youth initiative called “StudAlliance”. Since the
Museum established relations with this organisation a lot of common projects and events have been held. However it must be said, that not all of these events were dedicated to human rights’ issues.

In May, 2009, the Museum showed a film by Belarusian director Volha Nikalaichyk. The film is called “Liberation” and it portrays the persecution of the opposition and the suppression of democratic ideas in today’s Belarus. The film was produced in 2008. The characters in the film are people who have been punished more than once for their nonconformist behaviour but who still don’t want to obey the regime. The film tells how difficult it is for the objectors of the regime to express their ideas, how they are persecuted and punished, how crosses built in honour of victims of Soviet repressions are destroyed in today’s Belarus. We were very glad that the film director herself managed to come and share her thoughts with us.

On July 27, 2009 a photo exhibition was opened in the Museum’s conference hall. The exhibition was called “Belarus: Time and Place”. It showed photographs by the famous Belarusian photo-journalists Yulia Daraskevich (“Nasha Niva” newspaper) and Siarhey Hryts (“Associated Press” news network). The photos were taken in different years and portrayed the lives of Belarusians and Belarus’s route to independence and autonomy. There were also plenty of photographs depicting the opposition’s protests. Visitors were able to see clearly what had been happening in the neighbouring country.

This year we have already organised a few events too. In April, the Museum organised a round table discussion “Soviet Heritage in Belarus: History, Culture, Repressions of the Communist Regime, the Atheistic Policy”. Reports were read by Belarusian scientists – Igar Kuzniacou, a senior lecturer at the Belarusian State University, candidate of historical sciences, Siarhej Chareuski, lecturer at the European Humanities University and Yury Baczyszczca, senior lecturer at the European Humanities University, candidate of historical sciences. Even though their reports were more related to the Soviet past, they reflected the suppressions and restrictions that Belarusian scientists, who are analysing crimes of the Soviet regime, suffer today.

A month later, a reply round table discussion was held at the European Humanities University. Various Lithuanian historians participated in the discussion. They reviewed the Soviet past of Lithuania, its historical and cultural heritage and the influence of Communism on modern society.
These are just a few examples of our recent activities. The truth is, so far our efforts to educate people about human rights’ infringements, are quite modest. We are only trying to identify the problems and find solutions that would help to enforce human rights. We hope that in the future our activities in the human rights’ sphere will produce more tangible results. Our hope is based on the fact that events organised by the Museum have already received a good response from the public. In 2005, the Lithuanian Parliament passed a resolution on the genocide of the Armenian nation and acknowledged the Holodomor as genocide of Ukrainians. This happened right after the Museum of Genocide Victims organised the exhibitions “The Armenian Genocide. 1915” and “Not To Be Forgotten: The Chronicle of the Communist Inquisition in Ukraine”.

Please, wish good luck for us. Thank you for your attention.