

Vilna Remembered and Vilna Imagined: The Struggle of the Vilna  
Jewish Community to Recreate its Past

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# Vilna Remembered and Vilna Imagined: The Struggle of the Vilna Jewish Community to Recreate its Past

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## Abstract

Vilna, Lithuania was the heart and soul of the Jewish Diaspora for much of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was the religious, cultural and political cauldron that stirred the pot of the great contributions made to the world by this dynamic community of people. When the Germans entered Lithuanian territory in 1941 it signaled the beginning of the end of this wonderful period of Jewish European history. When the war began, there were 250,000 Jews in the country but by the time of the liberation by the Soviet troops, ninety-five percent of them had been killed by their murderous occupiers and the Nazis' willing Lithuanian collaborators.

The Jews of Vilna at the beginning of the war were forced into two ghettos that within a brief period of time became one as the attrition of the population took place. The killing fields of Ponar were in constant use as Jews were rounded up and sent to their deaths. Within the ghetto, the Nazi appointed Jewish leadership, called the *Judenrat*, tried to placate the enemy while the many Jewish political and social organizations combined to create a resistance movement. The fact that so many disparate groups were able to coalesce to form this resistance was unique in eastern European Jewish ghettos. Their leadership was correctly convinced that the Germans were going to kill them all, regardless of their level of cooperation or their political affiliation.

The final liquidation of the Vilna ghetto took place on September 23 and 24, 1943. Over time, the Jewish remnant there as well as those who struggled back from the labor and death camps tried to re-establish a Jewish presence in the city. After Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, this group began the task of preserving the heritage which was virtually destroyed under the Nazis and then

suppressed by the Soviets. As this slow process evolves, time will show whether the proud and deep heritage found there will be instrumental in the eventual success or failure of this endeavor.

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I would like to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr. Saul Friedman at Youngstown State University for his valuable insights and the incredible dedication to teaching the Holocaust which led to my inspiration for this thesis. "Knowledge imposes responsibility." This constant refrain of Dr. Friedman's was always in my mind as I worked on this thesis.

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## Introduction

Among the desperately sad events that occurred during the Holocaust of the Second World War, one of the most poignant was the destruction of the Jewish population of Vilna, Lithuania, proudly referred to as *Yerushalayim de Lita*; the Jerusalem of Lithuania. This designation showed the value of the cultural, social and theological contributions of the Jews in Vilna to Jewish culture in general. For over seven hundred years, the Jewish community of Lithuania flourished as a center of religious thought and as a cultural magnet rivaled by no other in Eastern Europe. The Jewish population of this small country provided a disproportionately large number of important thinkers, artists and writers to the world. At the height of Lithuania's Jewish past there were 250,000 Jews who lived there and contributed in powerful ways to their progeny and to the world at large. In 1941 the Germans forced all of the Jews of Vilna into two ghettos. Eventually these were consolidated into one restricted area containing about 80,000 Jews. When the Nazis finally destroyed the ghetto in September 1943, fewer than 3,000 Jews remained alive. The Jewish population was slaughtered during the Nazi occupation with the enthusiastic participation of local Lithuanian neighbors and associates with whom the Jews had coexisted for generations.

The social, political and religious strands of a diverse society converged in Vilna in the early twentieth century, and responded to the Nazi invasion in unique ways. Lithuania was a vital part of the vast Jewish expanse that covered the face of Eastern Europe. It was an entity unto itself with a unique type of Jewish-ness. It occupied a

prominent place on the map of the Jewish Diaspora and its influence spread far beyond its borders.<sup>1</sup>

Lithuania had long been a small country surrounded by larger and more powerful empires and ultimately regained its independence after centuries of being the prized possession of its neighbors. This ever-changing political power structure influenced and dramatically altered the Jewish history of Lithuania and particularly the city of Vilna.

After the Germans were pushed out of the area at the end of the war, the Soviets reclaimed hegemony and, with their stated bias against all things religious, maintained a climate similarly hostile to Jews. The fall of the Soviet Union led to Lithuanian independence in 1991, at which time the small remnant of Jews still left in Vilna began the work of resurrecting a community. The world had changed in dramatic ways during the intervening years, especially with the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Pride of knowledge in regard to the Jewish homeland allowed the people of Vilna to begin the painful task of memorializing the agonizing past so that a future could be built.

Twenty-first century Vilna is attempting to recreate a Jewish community by building and supporting organizations that are dedicated to offering the services needed for their community. There is now a Jewish day school, an active synagogue, a community center and a Jewish language newspaper in the city. Lithuanian Jewish (*Litvak*) culture is under repair, but it faces an unknown future. The history of the country and the city, particularly the Jewish community as it existed in the past and exists now, is worthy of exploration. The incredible organizational skills of the people throughout their history and the intensity of their religious life allowed Jews to flourish for generations. It

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<sup>1</sup> Avraham Kariv, *Lithuania Land of My Birth*, trans. I. M. Lask and Gertrude Hirschler (New York: The Herzl Press, 1967).



may be that these same traits will allow modern Vilna Jews to recapture the magic and the glory that once existed there.

The seminal Nietzschean concept of looking into the abyss dramatically describes the imperative felt by so many to concentrate on the Holocaust and to learn whatever lessons are possible in regard to man's inhumanity to man. Gertrude Himmelfarb, in her book *On Looking into the Abyss* (1994), proffers the admonition that all those who allow the Holocaust to be "demystified and normalized" have looked into the abyss and ignored the monster reflected therein.<sup>2</sup> All those who perpetrated the heinous crimes against the Jews and others during the Holocaust bear the absolute burden and must accept full responsibility for their inhuman and evil actions. The need to identify and explore the tragic circumstances and the resulting difficulties for posterity is a demand that cannot be ignored.

By examining the dynamic influences that were brought to bear on this community, it is possible to understand how and why a group of people choose to believe that a new future can be created out of a devastated past. The reality facing the renewed community may make success for the future problematic.

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<sup>2</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*, (New York: Knopf, 1994).

## Chapter One – History of Jewish Vilna prior to the Twentieth Century

Lithuania's strategic location along the Baltic Sea between the great powers of Europe and Russia contributed to its diverse heritage. According to legend, the modern state of Lithuania began with the founding of Vilna in 1322 by Gedymin, a Polish aristocrat. In order to attract settlers and facilitate development of the new city, Gedymin offered immigrants an exemption from any payment to the State for ten years, which was an extraordinary concession at the time. While there is no definite evidence that Jews flocked to the city because of this opportunity, it is likely that they eventually made their way there to ply their trades. It is known that the grandson of Gedymin proclaimed freedom for the Jews to both settle and move about his kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish population of the area increased and, in 1533, the Polish King Zygmunt the First decreed that all his subjects were to continue to honor the Jews' position and privileges that had been afforded them by prior regimes. Anti-Semitic feelings and actions throughout Europe were common at the time and Jews were granted very few rights and privileges that most other citizens enjoyed. Vilna became a major center for Torah study during the sixteenth century and the status of the local rabbinate grew in importance and was renowned throughout the area. Many works in Hebrew concerning the Talmud were written during this period and are still considered among the most important rabbinic writings of all time. The Jewish population of Vilna erected synagogues in the city that became important focal points for both the religious and secular lives of the Jews. Despite the Jewish community's increasing political influence

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<sup>3</sup> Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2000), 46.

in the city, the Poles still controlled governmental affairs. At the end of the sixteenth century Lithuanian Jews withdrew from the Polish Council of Jews (one of the few organized Jewish bodies at the time) and established their own body called the *Kahal*. The regulations formed by the *Kahal* became the basis for community life for the in Lithuania for the next century and beyond.

By the late seventeenth century the predominantly Christian influenced political system in Eastern Europe turned its attention to the Jewish population. Many governments placed restrictions on their movements, organized attacks upon their persons and property and made it extremely difficult for them to maintain their standard of living by curtailing their rights. Jews had finally gained a position in the economic and educational community in the area and were perceived as a potential threat to the Christian dominated society. In the eighteenth century, the Polish Republic was already losing much of its hegemony over Lithuania due to its frequent wars with other nations and subsequent loss of economic might. After Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812, France's influence waned as well. However, the French army that had passed through Lithuania instituted many civil and legal reforms in the spirit of the French Revolution that allowed the people of the area to regain some semblance of autonomy, short-lived though it was. It was during one of Napoleon's visits to Vilna that he made the famous statement that Vilna was the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" evidencing the status and growth of the Jewish community there during the early part of the nineteenth century.

### **Jewish Life before the First World War**

The most significant religious figure of the modern era, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (better known as the *Gaon* or genius of Vilna) lived from 1720 to 1797. He was

an incredibly erudite scholar who had a profound impact on Judaism. His method of analysis of the Talmud's text became the basis for virtually all subsequent study of that work. He was a modern thinker that encouraged the study of science and other disciplines along with religious teachings. His students established a Yeshiva (learning center) that attracted many of the major Jewish thinkers of the area to Vilna to study his writings. "Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century he enjoyed undisputed authority on matters of religious law among all the Jewish communities of Eastern and Central Europe."<sup>4</sup> It became a mark of prestige for Jews to live and study in Vilna. It was said that if one wanted to do business, one would go to Lodz, but if one wanted to gain wisdom, one went to Vilna.

### **Religious Movements**

During the time of the Gaon, a conflict developed between his followers, the *Mitnagdim* ("opposers"), and the predominant majority of Eastern European Jewry, known as the Chasidim. The Chasidim were exuberantly traditional in their customs and ceremonies and were intensely anti-rational. The Enlightenment in Europe stressed a rational approach to different aspects of human life which had the affect of marginalizing Chasidic practices. This religious divide of spiritual approaches resulted in a stark separation that reverberated through the ages, between the Jews of Lithuania and many other European communities. By 1810 a new movement called *Musar* (the moral movement), led by Rabbi Israel Salanter, came into prominence in Lithuania. The adherents of this group were particularly Lithuanian in their approach to theology and day to day life. The fundamental philosophy of this movement was the concentration on the legalist view of Judaism whereby a man's life would be dictated by the laws of the

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<sup>4</sup> Israel Cohen, *Vilna* ,(Phildelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1943), 216.

Bible. It was also seen as a barrier protecting the students of the Yeshivas and others in the community against the changes brought about by the Enlightenment. By the middle of the nineteenth century yet another movement arrived from Germany called the *Haskala*. Vilna became the center where most of the writers and scholars steeped in this movement resided. The *Haskala* differed from the *Musar* fundamentally since it was dedicated to spreading and embracing the modern secular world of the Enlightenment.

### **Cultural Life**

Lithuania was also the center for a dynamic cultural, literary and educational revival throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A network of Hebrew elementary, secondary and trade schools were established along with those dedicated to training the instructors for those schools. Yiddish daily and weekly papers were published and distributed throughout the area. There was also a profusion of Yiddish political, scientific, literary and educational magazines put out by the highly developed printing business that existed in Vilna. The Hebrew and Yiddish printers of Vilna were also the publishers of many of these works. These businesses maintained their important position in the Jewish literary world until the Second World War. Yiddish theater was also highly developed and well attended, particularly in Vilna itself as highlighted by the Vilna Troupe, the most famous of the traveling theater groups of the time. While anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic laws existed and were enforced throughout Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these activities and abilities allowed the Jews of Lithuania to maintain a powerful and vibrant community.

One of the anti-Semitic laws prohibited Jews from living in the rural areas and around big cities. This forced a gradual migration of these Jews to Vilna since it was a

center of commerce and learning, and the city accepted those forced to move. By the late eighteenth century almost two-fifths of the population of Vilna was Jewish. The Jews were both distinct and separate from the secular community, while at the same time they were an integral and critical part of the economic and even the political life of Lithuania.

The idea of a community co-existing as integral and separate entities was not an unusual state of affairs. For centuries, Jews had coalesced around certain geographies in order to maintain a vibrant and cohesive communal life that enabled them to participate in life cycle events as a group. It also afforded them a level of physical protection and security when attacked from without. Frequently, Jews had no choice in the matter and were forced into ghettos or restricted areas by the political powers of the land. In Vilna, Jews chose to live in close proximity to one another in an area around the Great Synagogue (an area that later became known as *Gydu* street – the street of the Jews). The greater Lithuanian community also compelled much of this focusing of living quarters by restricting the rights of Jews to buy and hold land in many other areas of the city.

A model for the typical Lithuanian Jew developed over the long period from the earliest arrival of the Jews in Lithuania through the beginning of the twentieth century. This prototypical person was classified as a *Litvak*. The term described a person “possessing a profound familiarity with the Talmud and *Halakhic* literature, a man of sharp intellect in whom logical thinking rather than emotions predominated, who was quick witted, and of a cool and dry temperament. The *Litvak* was also considered to be stubborn to the point of obstinacy...”<sup>5</sup> As the Lithuanian Jewish community moved into the pre-World War I period, it was these traits that were to serve the people well and also to cause them great harm in the tumultuous times ahead.

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<sup>5</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 36.

Russia annexed much of the region in 1815 and instituted its own particular brand of governance.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the middle part of the century, Lithuanians suffered at the hands of a Russian regime that persecuted the Catholic Church while improving the lot of the Russian Orthodox population. Russian was the only language allowed to be used during this period of Russification, a policy which had a severe impact on the mostly Yiddish speaking Jewish community. It was in the latter part of the nineteenth century that the economic boom that was occurring throughout Europe extended to Lithuania. It resulted in a commensurate increase in the number of merchants and traders who settled in Vilna, increasing again the Jewish population of the area. The Russian "May Laws of 1882" prohibited Jews from living in rural districts, again prompting them to move en masse to the urban centers. Every third inhabitant of Vilna by the end of the century was a Jew and the city had assumed a decidedly Jewish character.<sup>7</sup> Before the Second World War began there were over 100 synagogues in Vilna alone and more than 10 Yeshivas.

### **Yiddish**

One of the distinguishing features of European Jewry was the *mame loshen* (mother-tongue) of Yiddish that, although not a national language, is spoken by Ashkenazi Jews all over the world. It arose around the eleventh century out of a blend of a number of German dialects in the ghettos of Central Europe, and from there it spread to other parts of the world. Phonetically, Yiddish is closer to Middle High German than it is to modern German. Its vocabulary is enriched by borrowings from Hebrew, Slavic, some Romance languages, and more recently, English. To understand the explosion of cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Levin, *The Litvaks*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Vilna*, 334.

'Jewishness' in Vilna, it is necessary to clarify the place that the Yiddish language held among European Jews.

The irreplaceable words, and spirit, of Yiddish are inherently incandescent with history, civilization, satire, irony, compassion and the inner strength to be cheerful amid troubles. There is nothing about the language that is better or worse, more or less truthful or beautiful, than any other language. But its uniqueness and inimitability as the special living embodiments of a psyche is absolutely indispensable for a genuine grasp of East European culture.<sup>8</sup>

The language arose among Jews as part of the religious imperative to separate the holy from the profane, much as the Sabbath was a demarcation between the secular days of the week and a special day devoted to God. Hebrew was the language of the Old Testament and the tongue spoken by the teachers in the Yeshivas during their religious studies. In order to have a language that could be used in day to day life when discussing the mundane, Yiddish evolved. It had the added benefit of giving women intellectual freedom that they had not enjoyed before, since they were not allowed to study religious subjects with men. Thus, in literature, theater, singing and even discussions concerning politics and important matters of daily life women found their voice in this language. Adopting a special language also had some detriments, including the fact that it was a very obvious separator between the Jews and their neighbors.

From a rabbinical perspective and for the first time the *Gaon* encouraged, the importance of studying secular subjects. Having a non-holy language facilitated this within the community and thus quickly led to an explosion of ancillary activities beyond the bounds of the schools. The printing business in Vilna expanded dramatically because of the amazing amount of literature, newspapers and magazines that Jews around Europe demanded in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Ideas that germinated in one area quickly spread

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<sup>8</sup> Dovid Katz, *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 392.



to the greater Jewish world. Pride arose in the high level of intellectual accomplishments that the European Jewish community was contributing to the world. Vilna emerged as the academic center and symbolic capital of modern Yiddish culture in the city that the *Gaon* had made the undisputed heart for Talmudic scholarship. The city also became the world center for Yiddish literary, linguistic and folklore studies and higher education.

In 1925, a new Yiddish academic institute was formed in Vilna. The name that was selected, *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* (Yiddish Scientific Institute) and its Yiddish acronym, YIVO, was indicative of the fact that Yiddish was suddenly the language of a new international academic discipline; and it made Vilna the international address for Yiddish scholarship.<sup>9</sup> The language gained status as an important Jewish treasure that had gained respect from noted intellectuals throughout Europe. Both Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud were honorary board members of YIVO.

The nineteenth century brought with it the Enlightenment and the Zionist movement. Zionists tended to be anti-religious and therefore veered away from the traditional clothing as well as other cultural trappings of the "Old World Jew." The Zionists were committed to establishing Hebrew as the main language spoken by those who looked forward to the re-creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This created a division throughout Europe between the extant political and social parties. Bundists, unlike the Zionists, were firmly grounded in the Jewish proletariat who were primarily Yiddish speaking.

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<sup>9</sup> Katz, *Words on Fire*, 298.

## Chapter Two – Vilna 1900 - 1939

### Social & Political Organizations

Public opinion throughout Lithuania was increasingly opposed to the Russian prohibitions in terms of language use and other cultural freedoms. By the time of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905, Lithuanian demands for cultural autonomy led to frequent strikes and demonstrations in the country. The Lithuanian Social Democratic Party and the Jewish Bund led the effort, among other groups.<sup>10</sup> Two of the main non-religious Jewish organizations extant during the early part of the twentieth century were the Zionists and the Bundists. They were ideologically opposed to each other. The Bund (*Allgemeyner Idisher Arbeyter Bund*) was a part of the broad international Social Democratic movement that focused specifically on Jewish workers' organizations, and stressed the unity of the working class beyond ethnic or national differences. While the party's function was to advance socialism, their attraction for many Jews was concentrated in cultural and educational matters as well as in the trade union area.<sup>11</sup> Youth organizations were established and many activities that attracted children were started. The Bundists were also responsible for bringing the Yiddish language from a 'mother tongue' used at home to a language of literature and arts. The impact of this was profound because it helped to create a secular Jewish culture free from the "mystic" part of theology. Yiddish literature reached the masses with a popular message that resonated with the youth. Many of the Bund members were predominantly Yiddish speaking workers attracted to socialist ideology.

<sup>10</sup> Levin, *The Litvaks*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 261.

The Zionists also had a socialist segment called Poale Zion (Zionist Socialists). Significantly, the overall goal of the Zionist movement was not social revolution but rather the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. As a result there was a gradual but distinct splintering of the two groups along both economic and philosophical lines.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the Bund attracted largely working-class people, it was the acculturated middle classes and a segment of the upper classes that gravitated toward the Zionist camp. The Zionists took the idea of anti-Semitism much more seriously than did the Bundists, thinking that anti-Semitism would not disappear in Europe. As the wealthier segment of the population, they certainly had the most to lose if things began to unravel politically and militarily in the region. They therefore focused their attention on the territorial solution of a homeland for the Jews.

Between the wars, Eastern European Jews were subjected to frequent pogroms and anti-Semitic actions. During the 1930s the Bund began to use its powerful organizational skills and the strong arms of its workers to create militias committed to protecting the Jews from “nationalists” and others attacking the Jews. While the Bund remained an essentially socialist organization, its philosophy was broadened somewhat to include these militias. In 1939, one of its leaders proclaimed:

Today the working class is saying to the fascist and anti-Semitic hooligans: the time has passed when Jews could be subjected to the pogroms with impunity. There exists a mass of workers raised in the Bund tradition of struggle and self-defense. With them one can wage war, but not pogroms that remain unpunished.<sup>13</sup>

The resistance by the Bund acted as an antidote to the despair affecting Eastern European Jewry during the economic downturn following the First World War. Those in

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<sup>12</sup> Guido Goldman, *Zionism Under Soviet Rule: 1917- 1928* (New York: Herzl Press, 1960), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction*, 265, 290.

the community who were able to emigrate certainly did so, often to either America or Palestine. Those who remained were increasingly divided in their allegiance to Zionist or Bundist thought. Both organizations founded Jewish relief funds that performed admirably in helping the neediest to survive the difficult times. On the other hand, Polish and Lithuanian Jews exhibited amazing unanimity in welcoming those Jews who were being forced out of Germany by the Nazis. By 1938 the situation of Lithuanian Jewry deteriorated rapidly. A "Lithuania for Lithuanians" campaign was launched mainly by farmers and urban economic organizations. The anti-Jewish agitation was accompanied by physical assaults on Jews throughout Lithuania. The situation turned Lithuania "into a cage without hope for Jewish youth."<sup>14</sup>

### **Political control of Lithuania**

Poland controlled Lithuania from 1920 to 1939, at which time the Soviet army entered the country. For a short period Lithuania again became independent and Vilna was returned to the fold. In 1940 Vilna, along with the rest of the country was annexed to the U.S.S.R. In June 1941, the Germans invaded Lithuania as part of their offensive against the Soviet Union. These changes had a profound impact on the demographics of the Jewish community of the area. Refugees from both the Polish and German occupations fled to Lithuania via Vilna, which at the time was in Russian territory. There were many intellectuals, political and communal leaders, who ended up in Vilna and became the very foundation of the eventual resistance movements. In addition, some of those returning from Russia had been a part of the Soviet military and were trained in warfare. Pogroms were staged throughout Lithuania, specifically in Vilna, without much

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<sup>14</sup> Dov Levin, *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis, 1941 - 1945*, translated by Moshe Kohn and Dina Cohen (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), 10.

Jewish resistance because there had been no time to organize. The impetus was there for members of various Zionist and Bundist groups to meet and discuss ways to deal with issues of self defense.

Movement leaders dispatched messengers to the various centers located in Warsaw, Byelorussia and elsewhere instructing them to assemble in Vilna. Lithuanian authorities closed or nationalized Jewish businesses, factories and workshops thereby destroying much of the economic strength of the community. The traditional power structure of the city lost its form with the expulsion of the business leaders. Zionist youth movements organized themselves for underground operations after they were declared illegal or seen as ideologically dangerous.<sup>15</sup> After the Red Army arrived, the editors of the Jewish papers were replaced and most of the papers were closed down. Just before the German invasion in 1941, 35,000 people (including 7,000 Jews) were expelled from Lithuania and sent to Siberia.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publishing, 1980), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Levin, *Fighting Back*, 23.

## Chapter Three - World War II

When the Germans invaded Lithuania the Red Army hastily retreated. After the recent Soviet rule, most Lithuanians were convinced that the Germans offered them the best chance to remain an independent country and thus strongly supported the Nazis. Two stark choices faced the Vilna Jewish community— to remain or to depart. They knew that the local population represented a threat to their livelihood and lives, yet the majority decided to stay, remaining at home with their families rather than running off to an unknown destination. There was no real way for them to have known the consequence of that fateful decision. The Russian military rejected many of the young Jews who fled to that country to join. The *Komsomol* (Communist Youth Organization) was the exception and many Jews ended up carrying arms for the Soviets under its auspices. At the end of 1941, the Red Army decided to create a Lithuanian division and young Jews en masse rushed to enlist. Many of these men eventually became a part of the armed fighters of the resistance.

With the arrival of the German army in Lithuania in 1941 came an intensification of the organized, methodical killing and kidnapping of Jews carried out by both the Nazis and the very willing Lithuanian nationals. They sent many Jews to forced labor camps and to their deaths. The combined German/Lithuanian *Einsatzgruppen* forced those that were left in the cities into ghettos. The German military command established a Jewish representative body, the *Judenrat*, designed to assist in implementing the German policy.<sup>17</sup> This marked the first time that there was direct contact between the German

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<sup>17</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 58.

military occupation forces and the Jews without the Lithuanian administration acting as a go-between. Fifty- seven members of the various Jewish organizations met to discuss the establishment of the *Judenrat*.

### **Reinhard Heydrich and the Plan for the Final Solution**

According to a secret document within the Ribbentrop - Molotov Pact of August, 1939, upon the dual invasion of Poland, Russia would get the eastern part of Poland while Germany was to get the west. This had the affect of putting Vilna in Russia while the other major cities of Lithuania came under German rule. The Germans at this time tried to find different solutions to the "Jewish Problem."

The first of the failed plans was to concentrate the Jews in Madagascar. Adolph Eichmann and Stahlecker later wanted to move all of the Jews living in German occupied areas to the Lublin region of Poland (known as the "Nisko and Lublin plan"). When this too seemed unattainable, Hitler lost interest in creating a Jewish "reservation." It became clear that there was a need to find another method to accomplish their goal and to derive a "final" solution to the 'Jewish Problem.'" Hitler charged Heinrich Himmler with the responsibility to create a final solution.

The *Schnellbrief* of September 21, 1939, written by Reinhard Heydrich, one of Himmler's subordinates, documented the instructions for the final fate for the Jews of Poland as well as instructions to the German security forces on how to deal with the Jews throughout Europe.<sup>18</sup> He told them that the final goal would be to rid the world of the Jews, although this was not explicit in the original document. This document was supposed to have been kept secret and was only given to a few of the German command

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<sup>18</sup> <[http://www1.yadvashem.org/about\\_holocaust/chronology/1939-1941/1939/chronology\\_1939\\_12.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_holocaust/chronology/1939-1941/1939/chronology_1939_12.html)> (15 May 2005).

(the *Einsatzgruppen*) who later became responsible for much of the murder of European Jewry. Heydrich listed a series of steps to implement the “final solution,” as it was referred to. First the Jews were to be concentrated in ghettos. In each ghetto there was to be a council of elders among the Jews that would be called the *Judenrat* consisting of twenty- four men. Their function would be to transfer the Jews from their homes to the ghettos the Germans would establish. The Jews were also to be categorized according to their age and profession since that would determine their short-term value to the war effort. Concentrating the Jews in the ghettos would serve the dual purpose of isolating the Jews from society while at the same time breaking the spirit of those kept within the ghetto boundaries. The transfer of Jews would also rid them of their possessions (that of course were confiscated by the Germans or locals), wreaking economic devastation on the Jewish community. Finally, it would serve the need to de-humanize the Jews by making it clear to the surrounding society that they were not worthy to live among the greater population. Organization within the ghetto would also be given to the *Judenrat* who were instructed to implement the Nazi policies toward their own people, resulting in a morale problem within the compound. It also determined the need to establish the ghettos near railroad stations or at crossroads so that the eventual liquidation of the populace could be carried out more efficiently. All of these steps came to be used in Lithuania over subsequent years.

### **Ponar**

When visitors travel to the *Paneriai* Woods today they are overwhelmed by the beauty and serenity that blankets the forest. Prior to the war, this area was a favored place for families and children to come for picnics and celebrations and one can readily see



why. Wandering through the worn paths, visitors see many obviously man-made circular pits scattered throughout the area. After the Nazi invasion this area became the killing fields of Ponar.

There are monuments erected at some of these pits that now note in some detail the fact that this area was used by Lithuanian collaborators as a place to perpetrate mass murder at the order of the Nazis. After Lithuanian independence in 1991, the markers placed there by the Lithuanians noted that the vast majority of the dead who were shot, thrown into the pits and then burned there were Jews from Vilna and the surrounding towns. It is also properly noted on these monuments that the deaths were caused by Nazis with the "willing collaboration of the Lithuanians." It is interesting that this bit of information is written on the monuments in Hebrew and in Yiddish, but not in Lithuanian.

When the Russians still controlled the area, they also erected monuments (of sorts) in the Ponary Woods. Their inscriptions, however, were dramatically different in fact and feel. For example, one said, "The Hitlerite forces used this site as a mass grave for corpses." Another pit was marked by the quote, "In this eight meter deep pit, the Hitlerite Invaders brought those who were rounded up, burned their corpses and disposed of their bones." Soviet ideology clearly considered all of the victims "Soviet citizens" and would not allow reference to German race considerations in the genocide of the Jews. This is particularly poignant since there is an eerily similar killing field found in present-day Russia called Babi Yar.

*No monument stands over Babi Yar  
A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone  
I am afraid.  
Today, I am as old*

*As the entire Jewish race itself.*

These lines begin the poem composed by Yevgeni Yevtushenko protesting the fact that for years there was no monument at Babi Yar even though the Germans had killed, buried and burned more than 100,000 people, mostly Jews, at this ravine outside of Kiev. The poem goes on to say:

*The trees look sternly, as if passing judgment.  
Here, silently, all screams, and, hat in hand  
I feel my hair changing shade to gray.*

Both Babi Yar and Ponar were part and parcel of the overall German plan to eliminate all Jews from the world. The murderers at Ponar were part of the *Einsatzkommando 9*, established by the German High Command to deal with the general extermination of the Jews.

There were typically three nearly simultaneous and/or successive stages in the process carried out by the *Einsatzkommando 9* (E.K9). Stage One was the kidnapping of Jews from the streets and from their homes and sending them to the Lukiszki Prison on the outskirts of Vilna. There is documented evidence showing that Lithuanian civilians would be paid ten rubles for every Jew brought to the German command. The kidnapping (*hapunes* in Yiddish) occurred both on the streets and in the homes of the victims and might have occurred at different times throughout the day or night. Ostensibly, the abductors were meant to take the men for work assignments for the invaders. Mothers and spouses were told that the men were taken to work camps. These actions began in July 1941, and by July 20 of five thousand men had been taken and killed. The street captures failed to provide the requisite number of Jews sent to their deaths at Ponar, so to complete the daily quota, the *Judenrat* in Vilna was told to make up the difference. No

one knew at that time that each person was being sent to his death. In order to avoid abduction a new phenomenon began in the ghetto. *Malines*, or improvised hiding places, were quickly created and used to hide from the kidnapers. The initial policy of the E.K. 9 was to take only men and to try to liquidate the Jewish leadership and intelligentsia because they were the ones most likely to organize and resist.

The prisoners were detained at the Lukiszki prison which became a transit spot on the way to Ponar. They would spend from several hours to any number of weeks in the cells depending on the number of Jews that the firing squad could deal with in one day. It should be noted that there were instances where some Jews were either taken directly to the forest to be shot or spent the night in the courtyard of the Gestapo building.

The third stage involved taking the Jews from the prison or Gestapo headquarters in trucks and trains on their final trip to Ponar. When the Soviets controlled the area, they had dug deep pits in the woods for fuel tanks. Each hole was between two and eight meters deep with a diameter of between fifteen to fifty meters. The raised embankments around the pits had passageways leading to the holes. This became a perfect site for the E.K. 9 to perform their duties of eradicating Jews from the world. The *Obersturmführer* (commander) of the E.K. 9 was a man named Schauschutz who quickly determined that the Lithuanian system of killing using machine guns was not efficient. Whereas the Lithuanians would line the Jews up and indiscriminately fire into the masses and let the bodies fall into the pits, the Germans determined that only rifles should be used so that one bullet would be used for each victim and to insure that no one would escape and to reduce the expenditure of costly bullets.

The victims were brought into waiting zones some hundreds of yards from the firing pits. They were forced to undress and to give their captors whatever valuables they had on their persons. They were then marched, in groups of ten to twenty, naked and holding hands, to the scene of slaughter. When they reached the edge of the embankments above the pits, they were shot. The bodies would fall into the pits but there was no effort made to determine if each person was dead. The corpses were covered with a thin layer of lime and sand and then the next batch of victims would be brought in. Those in the waiting zone clearly heard the discharge of the guns but while they could not be sure of what fate awaited them, they suspected that their death was near. They did not want to believe the obvious.

Ponar was located in a non-Jewish area outside Vilna. The inhabitants of the area later testified that during the month of July 1941, they saw first hundreds and then thousands of people brought to the forest – going but not coming out. They heard the gunshots resonate through the silence yet the killing continued.<sup>19</sup> In his diary, Herman Kruk, who would later become the Vilna Ghetto librarian, noted: “Rumors reached the *Judenrat* on July 10 that there are shootings in Ponar. But the *Judenrat* refused to heed the warning because it was idle gossip.”<sup>20</sup> On July 15, more people came to the Jewish leaders to offer first hand testimony but the *Judenrat* refused to believe that innocent people were being taken away and shot for no reason. Even non-Jewish residents of the Ponar region got word to the Jews that these horrific events were occurring. In September of that year, six wounded women made their way back to Vilna and related what had transpired. They said that when they were shot they fell into the pit but were buried by

<sup>19</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 172, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939 – 1944*, translated by Barbara Harshav (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 61.

other bodies and were eventually able to escape to the surrounding farms. The *Judenrat* continued its policy of silence on Ponar and thus the majority of the Jews of Vilna knew nothing of what was happening there.

The main body of the *Einsatzkommando 9* left at the end of July in 1941 but that did not end the killing. The Lithuanian collaborators continued the effort to execute the Jewish population. In a secret Reich letter dated December 1, 1941, the Nazis carefully documented the number of Jewish men, women and children who were killed by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their collaborators between August 9 and November 25 of that year throughout Eastern Europe. The numbers for Vilna follow:

8/12- 9/1/41	City of Wilna: 425 Jews, 19 Jewesses, 8 Comm. (m.), 9 Comm. (f) = 461
9/2/41	City of Wilna: 864 Jews, 2,019 Jewesses, 817 Jewish children (sonderaktion because German soldiers shot at by Jews) = 3,700
9/12/41	City of Wilna: 993 Jews, 1,670 Jewesses, 771 Jewish children = 3,334
9/17/41	City of Wilna: 337 Jews, 687 Jewesses, 247 Jewish children and 4 Comm. = 1,271
10/4/41	City of Wilna: 432 Jews, 1,115 Jewesses, 436 Jewish children = 1,983
10/16/41	City of Wilna: 382 Jews, 507 Jewesses, 257 Jewish children = 1,146
10/21/41	City of Wilna: 718 Jews, 1,063 Jewesses, 586 Jewish children = 2,367
10/25/41	City of Wilna: 1,776 Jewesses, 812 Jewish children = 2,578
10/27/41	City of Wilna: 946 Jews, 184 Jewesses, 73 Jewish children = 1,203
10/30/41	City of Wilna: 382 Jews, 789 Jewesses, 36 Jewish children = 1,553
11/6/41	City of Wilna: 340 Jews, 749 Jewesses, 252 Jewish children = 1,341
11/19/41	City of Wilna: 76 Jews, 77 Jewesses, 18 Jewish children = 171
11/25/41	City of Wilna: 9 Jews, 46 Jewesses, 8 Jewish children = 63 <sup>21</sup>

When it became obvious in 1944 that the Germans would be driven from the area by the advancing Soviets, efforts were made to destroy the evidence of the mass killings.

Eighty Jews from the Kailis work camp were brought to dig out and burn the corpses.

<sup>21</sup> "The Einsatzgruppen – Mobile Killing Units", Ben Austin's Sociology Corner  
<http://www.mtsu.edu/~baustin/einsatz.html> <20 February 2005>.

Piles were made of alternating layers of bodies and wood. Evidence of this is clear today when visiting the Ponar pits since the trees closest to the pits are clearly younger than those in the surrounding forest. The older trees of 1941 had been used to burn the bodies. Immediately after the war there were ashes covering everything, like snow. These ashes were gathered and put into the pits as well. The workers brought from Kailis attempted to escape because they knew the SS would eventually kill them. Of the initial eighty workers that were brought to Ponar, only eleven made it to safety. The Germans then brought more workers from Kailis to finish the job. All of them were killed, becoming the last victims of the horror that was the killing fields of Ponar. It would be almost forty years after the event before a monument to the dead would be erected and another wait of ten years or so before a burial monument consistent with Jewish law would finally be put in place to commemorate these who had perished there.

### **The Vilna Ghettos**

On August 31, 1941, based on the false accusation that Jews had killed three Germans, Nazi troops began an *Aktion* that they claimed was a reprisal for the killings that later became known as the "provocation." During the following week the Germans removed and killed about 10,000 Jews, leaving physical space in the area of Vilna for what was to become the next part of their plan. On the evening of September 1, and continuing for the next five days, the streets of the Jewish Quarter were sealed off. Walls were erected, windows were boarded up, and non-Jewish families living in those sections were moved out. On the morning of September 6 all the Jews were ordered to leave their homes and move to the ghetto, taking only what they could carry. Not all of the Jews were able to find places to stay and so were forced to sleep outside the ghetto area. On

September 12, those Jews who were not within the bounds of the ghettos were taken away to Ponar and thus another 3,000 were eliminated. In the early stages, there were two ghettos with people being placed randomly in each. Ghetto One initially had 29,000 people and Ghetto Two had 19,000 inhabitants, creating the appellation of the “Large” Ghetto and the “Small” Ghetto. On September 15, 3,550 people were sent from the small to the large ghetto but only 600 arrived – the rest were transferred to *Lukiszki* Prison and from there to Ponar and to their deaths. The inhabitants of the ghettos were still unsure about their fate and even believed that a Ponar “camp” existed where the Jews were being imprisoned but not killed. “The Jews of Vilna had no inkling of the events at Ponar throughout the period from July to November, 1941, during which time tens of thousands of Jews were put to death. Rumors were not believed.”<sup>22</sup>

By creating the ghettos the Germans effectively cut off communications between the Vilna Jewish community and Jews in other towns and areas. The Jews then tried to establish messengers who would go between the towns and villages to take and deliver messages. They had to be able to pass as non-Jews and be fluent in Polish (speaking with a non-Jewish accent) and thus most were girls or young women. They braved the areas outside of the ghettos to bring news to those contained therein. The information brought to the ghetto leadership by these women affected the decisions that were being made by the youth movements as well as the more senior organizations.

The German plan for the large ghetto was to gradually exterminate certain categories of Jews while temporarily leaving the productive others alive to work in their factories. The small ghetto faced problems of budget, lack of adequate food, weak leadership and thus had less to offer the German high command. The *Aktionen* directed

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<sup>22</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 178.

against the smaller ghetto were done without the knowledge of the local Jewish leadership and simply involved the German and Lithuanian squads going from house to house, seizing the occupants without any selection and then sending them to their deaths. There is no question that there was complicity with the Nazis by many Lithuanians. The Catholic Church in the country forbade help to the Jews and, in fact, members of the clergy sent Hitler a congratulatory note on the event of the invasion. Between October 29 and 31, the entire small ghetto was liquidated and the only Jews left in Vilna were huddled together in Ghetto One.

In the remaining ghetto the Germans introduced the special yellow work paper known as the *Schein*. In mid October 1941 those who had these papers were told to gather their families and take them to their place of work. Many of those who did not have the *Schein* were then gathered up by the Nazis and taken to Ponar or transferred to work camps. It was estimated that over five thousand Jews lost their lives on the "Day of the Yellow Schein" *Aktion*.

### **The Judenrat**

The Jewish authorities had almost unlimited power over those in the Vilna ghetto. While they made sure that German demands for forced labor were always met, they also created scores of social service programs that were intended to make life in the ghetto manageable. Organized underground activity also commenced, focusing first on trying to establish communication links with other ghettos but later on the idea of resistance and retaliation.

The Vilna ghetto was unlike many of the other Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. The Warsaw ghetto in Poland was the largest in the area and had



been the center for the Bund and dozens of other Jewish groups. The organizations within the Warsaw ghetto succeeded in starting both a courier service to maintain contact with other Jewish enclaves and an underground paper devoted to military and political news about the war. The significant difference in Warsaw as opposed to Vilna had to do with the ability of the various groups to consolidate and coordinate action. The political parties of Warsaw first took care of their own, as a family looks after its members. Each party safeguarded its own constituency, its activities and its loyal supporters. Warsaw was the locus of the parties' central committees, the stronghold of party operations. They provided first for their own members and then extended the periphery of their concern to the rest of the public.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Partisans – Resistance and the FPO**

In Vilna, a very different dynamic occurred.<sup>24</sup> The leaders and organizers of many of the Zionist and Bundist movements flooded the city during its brief moment of independence. Those who gathered there had some knowledge of what was occurring to the Jews in other parts of Europe. In addition, many were young men who had been part of the armies of Poland and the Soviet Union and came to the ghetto with basic military training. Significantly, these leaders were the first to recognize the reality of what the Nazis were actually doing to the Jews.

What was unique about Vilna was that the different Zionist movements came to the conclusion that what was really happening was a total annihilation of the Jews by the Germans and we understood that we would be fighting against the German empire... we realized that they were killing Jews, not party members. In Vilna, we decided that we were all equal... We came to the conclusion that we had no

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<sup>23</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933 – 1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 266.

<sup>24</sup> Nissan Reznik, telephone interview by author. (14 November 2004). Translated by author.

chance to stay alive... We said that they, the Germans, would not be the ones who would decide for us how we were to die.<sup>25</sup>

The Zionists, Bundists, Jewish Communists and other party leaders eventually put aside their differences and agreed to form one central committee to handle all resistance activities. Initially, Itzhak Witenberg, who was the head of the Communist organization, was appointed as commander of the group whose members were mostly Zionists. The feeling at the time was that having him in command would make it easier to contact the Soviet underground at a time of need.<sup>26</sup> They resolved jointly to “establish an armed fighting organization ... to include representatives from each body in the hope of unifying all of the organized forces of the ghetto and to make preparations for mass armed resistance.”<sup>27</sup> They also agreed to try to help the partisan movement and to aid the Red Army’s fight against the Nazis. This new organization was called the FPO (*Fareynigte Partizaner Organizatsie*). It is important to note that the FPO was the first Jewish underground group to adopt the idea of armed resistance. This idea as well as the benefit of combining differing organizations into one spread to some of the other ghettos.

Throughout 1942 and 1943, the Germans periodically and methodically removed groups of Jews that they considered dissidents from the ghetto, and then exiled them to Estonia or had them killed in Ponar. The ghetto leadership, under the direction of the head of the *Judenrat*, Jacob Gens, convinced the majority of the community that their best chance for survival was to work for the Germans. In September 1943, the FPO called for an armed uprising. The majority of the Jews did not respond to their call, siding with Gens, since they believed that a revolt would be certain death. Gens’ view was that

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<sup>25</sup> Reznik interview.

<sup>26</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 237.

<sup>27</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 220.

armed resistance could only lead to the destruction of the entire ghetto due to the tactics of "collective responsibility" that the Nazis employed. The Nazis persecuted the entire population for the infraction of any member. Ultimately, the twenty thousand unarmed "inmates" of the ghetto realized that during a revolt they would be forced to hide and flee while the few hundred armed resistance members confronted the Nazis. The alternative of deportation to labor camps in Estonia would at least grant them a longer lease on life. Thus, the FPO did not launch a revolt, but instead chose to leave the ghetto for the surrounding forests and join up with other established partisan movements.

### **The Witenberg Affair**

During July of 1943, prior to the call to arms, there was an underground Lithuanian Communist agent who was captured by the Germans. Under intensive interrogation, he told the enemy that his contact in the Vilna ghetto was Itzhak Witenberg. In the meantime, Gens had assembled the FPO leaders at his home to discuss what he had heard about the captured agent from the ghetto Jewish police. Gens stated that the security police insisted on taking Witenberg into custody or that they would liquidate the ghetto. The Germans had also discovered that the Communists had a hidden printing press within the walls.

Witenberg went into hiding in spite of the belief held by the entire ghetto hierarchy that he was endangering all their lives. He tried to escape by dressing as a woman but was caught by a number of ghetto residents. He succeeded in escaping again and reached a location that was guarded by the FPO. They presented him with the facts and the obvious danger to all the ghetto inhabitants. Witenberg countered with his belief that the ghetto was doomed anyhow and that they should arise together in immediate

armed resistance. The leaders explained that the majority of the ghetto population did not hold to Witenberg's point of view and thus, if there were to be an uprising at that moment, they would have to fight Jews as well as Germans. While Witenberg offered to commit suicide so that his body could be given to the Nazis, the enemy command demanded that he be delivered alive. The FPO leadership tried to devise various ways to extricate him from this predicament but, ultimately, agreed that he would have to turn himself in. Even Witenberg's comrades in the Communist party were convinced he should surrender.

He finally parted from his associates to think and then returned and named Abba Kovner the new commander of the underground. He was to then meet with Gens who had promised him that if he did not break during the interrogation, Gens would take the necessary steps to get him back to the ghetto alive.<sup>28</sup> On July 16, 1943 Witenberg was handed over to the German security police. The next morning he was found dead in his cell – poisoned with cyanide which Gens had given to him at their last meeting.

### **Other forms of Resistance**

Importantly, there was a resistance being mounted within the Vilna ghetto that did not involve military actions. Lithuania's powerful religious and cultural history created within the populace a strong need to continue doing things that could connect them to their past and keep them sane in insane times. Underground groups in the Vilna ghetto organized a number of educational, religious and cultural institutions in order to consciously preserve Jewish culture. The goal was to maintain their human dignity and personal integrity so that the spirit of the individual would not be broken. One ghetto survivor expressed the thought this way: "You ask of resistance – to live one more day is

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<sup>28</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 393.

resistance. Amid the dysentery and typhus, the starvation, is resistance. To teach and learn is resistance.”<sup>29</sup>

There have been a number of diaries and secret archives found in many of the Eastern European ghettos that shed light on this significant part of Jewish resistance during the war. Herman Kruk, the founder of the Vilna ghetto library, expressed a countervailing point of view in one of these recently translated chronicles. Printed on flyers and handed out within the ghetto walls, Kruk’s statement “You don’t make theater in the graveyard” challenged the accepted practice of holding cultural events in the ghetto. On the other hand, even Kruk recognized the value in these activities in terms of maintaining Jewish morale, noting that the demand for books from his library increased after each Aktion depleted the ghetto population.<sup>30</sup> This reinforces the significant point that Jews clung to their culture to the end and utilized it as a survival tool.

### **The Doomed Resistance**

Historians have always taken the position that the creation of the FPO was instigated by a pamphlet written by a young man named Abba Kovner who, at the time of the creation of the resistance, was being sheltered in a Dominican convent outside of the ghetto. Kovner was known for his talent as a writer and drafted a manifesto in Hebrew and Yiddish that was distributed to the ghetto population.

Yes, we are weak with little or no defense, but we have one and only answer to the murder; fighting back! Brethren, it is better to die as free soldiers than to live at the mercy of our murders... Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter. Whoever goes out of the gates of the Ghetto will never return... Ponary’s not a concentration camp – everyone is shot there... until our last breath.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Saul S. Friedman, *A History of the Holocaust* (Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2004), 233.

<sup>30</sup> Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 283.

<sup>31</sup> Abba Kovner, *Scrolls of Testimony*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 79.

These words resonated with many of the young members of the ghetto. It marked the first time that a public document described the situation in Vilna as part of a Nazi general plan to exterminate the Jews. It was also the first time the Jews in the ghetto were called to an armed resistance.

Many of the resistance fighters that left the ghetto never made it to their destinations having been captured on their way by the enemy or turned into the authorities by locals currying favor with the Nazis. At least seven hundred FPO fighters managed to reach the forests and align themselves with the partisans. There, they fought heroically against the Nazis, even if their actions had no major impact on the Germans. They often engaged in acts of sabotage using "hit and run" guerrilla tactics, even succeeding in blowing up one train full of arms bound for the Nazi army. They also struggled mightily to become a communication liaison with the various ghettos by publishing and distributing propaganda and news that they got from Russian radio stations. The setbacks were continuous with many of the partisan members being captured by the enemy or starving to death. Survival was often the order of the day, rather than coordinated attacks on an intractable foe. The FPO leadership, even in the forests, was determined to try to help protect those left in the ghettos. Any actual resistance, however, was doomed to fail due to lack of weaponry, the minimum number of available partisan soldiers and the staggering force of the Nazis. The Russians became the ultimate leaders of the partisans in the forest and the FPO quickly acceded to their command.

### **The End of the Ghettos and World War II**

By September 5, 1943, thousands of Jews had been sent from the Vilna ghetto to their death at Ponar. The Germans sent Vilna's last Jewish women and children to be

murdered in the Majdanek concentration camp. A few able-bodied men and women were sent to a labor camp in Estonia. On September 9, the Gestapo ordered Jacob Gens to surrender to them. Gens had the chance to run away to save his life, but instead chose to surrender to the Germans who shot him the next day. The Germans then deported the last Jews of the Vilna ghetto. While the Nazis used the ghetto people to provide manpower to the Estonian labor camps for a time, they ultimately destroyed the ghetto because of the core of resistance found there.<sup>32</sup> On July 13, 1944 the Soviet Red Army liberated Vilna. Several hundred ragged survivors gathered in the city, coming in from the forests and the hiding places where they had taken refuge. Those who had left the city through the sewers came back as victors carrying their weapons. They came back to a city seemingly free of Jews and walked the empty streets wondering if they were the only Jews left. The Vilna ghetto at that moment left only enough evidence to become an historical footnote.

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<sup>32</sup> Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 440.

## Chapter Four – Vilna after the Second World War

### Memory in History

There is a discussion raging among historians as to whether or not testimonies should be included in the historical record. In Israel particularly, there existed for the first several decades of the country's independence what was termed an "environment of memory," or more precisely an environment of protected memory, due to the large proportion of Holocaust survivors living there. This led to a virtual neglect of Holocaust studies in the country's schools based on the fear of tipping the delicate balance of the emotional and collective health of the populace. In essence, the survivors were not at that time ready to talk about their recent horrific experiences. Neither was a country that was constantly in a state of war prepared to alter the feeling that there was a "new Jew" about – one that was not a lamb, but rather a lion, ready and capable of defending himself. "The relative silence that continued for about thirty years after the Holocaust was broken only by the Eichmann trial in 1961, when David Ben-Gurion made it clear that the memorialization of the Holocaust had both an educational and a national message. Still, even after the trauma of the trial, it took more than a generation for young Israelis to replace the statements about 'like sheep to the slaughter' with the deep study of the testimonies about the helplessness of the victims and about the heroism in every day life in the ghettos and the death camps."<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, after the Munich massacre of the Israeli Olympic team in 1972, the country began to look very differently at the events that had occurred in ancient Israel on Masada. Jews had always glorified the "sacrifice" of those who had been on Masada and

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<sup>33</sup> The Long Road to the New Museum by Avi Beker <[www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/printarticleen.jhtml?itemnumber=552073](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/printarticleen.jhtml?itemnumber=552073)> 15 March 2005.



chosen to commit suicide rather than to become slaves of the Romans. The attitude of the Israeli population became markedly tilted after Munich (where the athletes had taken no active steps to save themselves from the terrorists) toward those who would fight until death rather than “go like sheep to the slaughter.” The survivors of the Holocaust, who carried within them the guilt of survival, were then more prepared to explain to their countrymen what it took to survive. The disclosure of their remembered experiences was an attempt to defeat, posthumously, the Nazi policy of the annihilation of the Jewish soul.

The historian David Thelen of Indiana University said that “the challenge of history is to recover the past and introduce it to the present. This, of course, is the task of memory as well.” Many historians seem to judge immediately that memory is likely to be faulty or subjective and is therefore of limited value in documenting the “real” history – one based solely on facts. They happily point to any number of instances where it has been shown that even a person with a precise mind is likely to be inaccurate in his memory. A recent example concerned the lawyer John Dean, who worked as counsel in the Nixon White House and provided first- hand accounts of his conversations with the President during the Senate Watergate hearings. Most who heard Dean’s testimony were extremely impressed with his ability to recall, seemingly verbatim, the words that were said at various meetings. Once it was disclosed that there were hidden tapes of these conversations made by the White House and they were compared to Dean’s memory, it was clear that it was not as accurate as most had assumed.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the question of whether his testimony was of value to the historical record should not be in dispute since his testimony led directly to the later findings of fact that ultimately caused Nixon’s resignation.

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<sup>34</sup> <<http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~kih1strm/rmpa00.htm> > 19 February 2005

“The subject of the Holocaust in Lithuania exemplifies the arguments of those who insist that there is no such thing as ‘objective history.’ Historians can establish that something took place in a certain place, on a certain date, but this, by historical standards, constitutes only chronology or, as East Europeans call it, ‘*faktologija*.’ (factology).”<sup>35</sup>

The trained historian who distrusts oral history in reference to the Holocaust can certainly find myriad other sources for a documented version of what transpired. The Nazi bureaucracy kept voluminous records on its actions, although it destroyed a large number of the Jewish archives during the war. The transcripts and associated documents introduced during the Nuremberg trials were filled with the ‘who/what/when/where/how’ activities of the ‘Final Solution.’ The question that should concern social historians as well as all those interested in the events that happened in Europe during the Second World War is more of the ‘how could this happen?’ flavor. The question becomes: “To what extent should memory, with its powerful and legitimate but inconsistent demands on our attention, be the guiding spirit of historiography?”<sup>36</sup>

There is an imperative given to the Jews in the Old Testament that they should remember through all the generations the acts of the people of Amalek. This tribe attacked the Israelites fleeing from Egypt from the rear, killing mainly the women and children. The story of the Exodus from Egypt, told by most Jews at the Passover table each year, recounts the memory of significant events in their religious history. They are also charged with the obligation to tell about these remembered events to their children and descendents so that the lessons of these memories will live on. The Talmud started out as the documentation of the oral history and laws of the Jews that had been passed

<sup>35</sup> <[http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01\\_4\\_05.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01_4_05.htm)> 16 October 2004

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Hartman. “Holocaust Videography, Oral History, and Education.” *Tikkun*, May/June 2001, 105.

down from generation to generation, father to son, ostensibly since the time of the Israelites wandering in the desert of Sinai. The Bible itself was the only written document that directly influenced the development of the Talmud. And yet, as time passed, Jews became a “People of the Book” and developed a reliance on printed records and factual and documented histories. Nevertheless, to this day Jews say, when one dies, “Y’hee zichro baruch” – may his/her memory be for a blessing. It is intrinsic to the Jewish mindset that the afterlife of a human soul, until the time of the Messiah, is bound up in the memories of the living. It is an imperative to keep alive the memory of the person by invoking the dead person’s name each year on the anniversary of their death and actively remembering the contribution of that person to those still alive.

### **Museums and Monuments**

One of many ways that people remember events of times past is through monuments and museums. *Yad Vashem*, the name of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Israel, comes from Isaiah 56:5: “And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (a “*yad vashem*”)... that shall not be cut off.” Even the name of the institution reminds the visitors of the imperative to remember the names and the stories of those that died during the war due to Nazi actions. The main portion of the museum presents the history of the Holocaust through photographs, documents and audio-visual aids including enormous numbers of recorded testimonies. The curators clearly placed the items of “collective” memory as prominently as the factual documentation, showing their comparative weighting of the sources.

It is interesting to note the differences, in the preservation of memory and the methods of display, between *Yad Vashem* and the United States Holocaust Museum

created by the U.S. Congress in 1980 in Washington, D.C. At the Israeli site, where many of the creators and visitors were themselves survivors of the Holocaust and their children, tremendous sensitivity was employed in determining how various displays were presented. For example, an original cattle car which was used to transport thousands of Jews to the death camps is perched on the edge of an abyss facing the Jerusalem forest and, beyond that, the Hadassah hospital, symbolizing the past horror as well as the rebirth and the regained opportunity for healing. A similar cattle car, displayed at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, is used as more of an experiential and hands-on exhibit, which is possible because of the distance of place and time relative to its typical visitor. The cattle car is used in Israel to evoke direct memories whereas in America it is more of a teaching tool, to add emotion to knowledge. In both places, a concerted effort is made to recreate the memory of the Holocaust by patching together the scraps, using primary and secondary source documentation as well as personal stories and items, to create the whole cloth of the beautiful legacy of Eastern European Jewry that was ripped asunder.

There is a special value of the recorded testimony of the victims of the Holocaust that extends beyond the value placed on testimony in an American court of law.

“Documents and books can convey ‘the facts’ but eyewitness testimony has the special ability to engage at a level that invokes both empathy and a desire to take action in the listener.”<sup>37</sup> The aftermath of the Second World War brought many amazing technological advances to the world that effectively enabled, for the first time, a comprehensive audio-visual (and thus more visceral) recording of the testimonies of victims and survivors that had previously been impossible.

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<sup>37</sup> <<http://www.vhf.org/vhf-new/menus/f-top.html>> 5 March 2005.

The most prominent example of the ongoing effort to collect and preserve information from the Holocaust and the stories of those who were there is made by the filmmaker Stephen Spielberg's now-famous *Shoah* project. Today the archives that are available on-line provide a "comprehensive international perspective" by including 52,000 testimonies in thirty-two languages which fulfill their mission to *shamor v'zachor*, remember and preserve. From Lithuania alone, 137 testimonies are recorded in the native tongue of the country. Another prime example of the value that these testimonies can evoke is the master work by Abba Kovner entitled, *Scrolls of Testimony*, translated into English in 2001. In this volume, Kovner succeeds in coupling the memories, both happy and sad, of a number of 'every-day' people with a religious theme. He offers his presentation in the traditional graphic style of the Talmud while trying to present the whole work as a new addition to traditional Jewish liturgy used in houses of prayer. His goal in publishing this work was to make sure that the memory of the Holocaust would become not only part of the thoughts of future generations but would also be included in their religious devotions.<sup>38</sup>

The absolute need to preserve and remember both the facts of the events in Europe between 1939 and 1945 as well as the sense of what is possible when a country's psyche becomes corrupted at the highest level makes it critical that historians and all others include every vestige of knowledge connected with the Holocaust into a whole that will encourage future generations to never forget. Academics may continue to debate the value and worth of memory as to how it should be used to present the past in a historiographical sense, but the discussion becomes damaging when the subject is so unique. A substantial part of an entire people's written legacy was destroyed by the Nazis

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<sup>38</sup> Kovner, *Scrolls of Testimony*.

in a premeditated way, initiated and sanctioned by the German government in Eastern Europe. Virtually all of European Jewry was wiped off the face of the earth, forever changing what could have been for this group of people. The Nazis tried to eradicate even the names of their victims by, for example, tattooing numbers on the arms of those in Auschwitz rather than using their names. The new structure of *Yad Vashem* that opened in March 2005 is a 180 meter long wing that ends in “The Hall of Names.” It contains the testimony of millions of Holocaust victims and concludes the effort to collect the names of all those who perished at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. It may never be entirely possible to fully understand what occurred during the Second World War but the imperative to try must always continue. In the words of Elie Wiesel, speaking at the United Nations on January 24, 2005, “What is memory, if not a noble and necessary response to and against indifference?”<sup>39</sup>

### **Kovner and Reznik**

History, it is said, is written by the survivors, and most often the victors. In the case of Holocaust historiography, much of the factual matter upon which the histories were based came, until recently, from outspoken people who had been involved in the struggles. As time goes on and more information is discovered and as more first-hand accounts are made available, discrepancies and questions tend to arise.

An example of this was produced by Nisan Reznik, considered to be one of the last living witnesses of the Jewish underground in the Vilna Ghetto. In 2003, Reznik published a memoir in which he recounted the story of the underground the “way that it really happened.” Told from the perspective of an eighty- five -year –old man looking back on his life with great detail, Reznik portrayed the creation of the FPO, the decision

<sup>39</sup> <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/R?r109:FLD001:E00209>> (10 May 2005).

to leave the ghetto for the forests and to fight the Nazis, and the reality of the fight. Furthermore, his account differed dramatically from the accepted version.

Abba Kovner was always considered to be one of the heroes and leaders of the resistance and one of the driving forces behind the creation of the FPO. In his book, Reznik noted that he and the leaders of various other Zionist, Bundist and Communist groups got together and created the FPO when they recognized that the Nazis were going to kill them all regardless of party affiliation. It was after the creation of the master organization, according to Reznik, that they contacted Kovner in the monastery and asked him to write his famous manifesto, which was based on the beliefs that the resisters held. In an interview with Reznik, he said: "Kovner was a writer, a poet and had the ability to express himself. He was not the one who created the underground organization... we had already formalized the ideas."<sup>40</sup>

Some have said that Reznik's attempt to set the record straight may have had another motive. Reznik's and Kovner's paths crossed again during a dramatic historical affair only three years after the end of the war. Both men settled in Israel, on two different kibbutzim. Reznik settled in kibbutz Nitanim, in the south, which was besieged by Egyptian forces during the war of independence in 1948. After evacuating the women and children and fighting a heavy battle with thirty five Israeli casualties, the fighters decided to surrender, and 104 members of the kibbutz, including Reznik, were taken as prisoners to Egypt. Neither the battle nor the prison experience scarred his soul, until Kovner penned and published a document while Reznik was imprisoned. Kovner not only condemned the kibbutz members, but also implied that they were traitors, saying

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<sup>40</sup> Reznik, Interview.

“surrendering is a time of sorrow... it is better to die fighting than give in to the enemy.”<sup>41</sup>

When Reznik was released and read the document, he expressed horror and dismay at both the content and the fact that it was written by Kovner. In response to the accusation, Reznik denigrated Kovner, saying “In my book I don’t attack Kovner or anyone else. I don’t talk about myself and my role. I only tell the story the way it was.”<sup>42</sup> There is no debate that both men were involved in the resistance and that both contributed to the successes made by the partisans in the latter years of the war. After the war, they both were intensely involved in helping survivors make their way to Palestine to rebuild their lives. Both were also warriors in Israel during the War of Independence. Kovner went on to become a prize-winning poet and author while Reznik became an accountant. The significance of this controversy goes more to the question of openness in discussing Holocaust issues than to the details of who did what.

### **Vilna Then and Now**

Of the 250,000 Jews who had lived in the country prior to 1941, about 17,000 survived, although most were not in Lithuania at the end of the War. Some of the survivors were in the labor or displaced person camps and many were in the Soviet Union. The proportion of Jews killed in Lithuania during the Holocaust was one of the highest in all of Europe. Those that returned to Lithuania when the concentration camps were closed came back to find that their families no longer existed. Most survivors ended up leaving the country as soon as they could and going either to Israel, the United States

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<sup>41</sup> Aryeh Dayan, “Kovner? He had a Marginal Role.” *Ha’Aretz.co.il*. <  
[www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/sShARTPE..Jhtml](http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/sShARTPE..Jhtml)> (10 October 2004)

<sup>42</sup> Reznik, Interview.



or South America. Those few who remained tried to rebuild their lives and to reestablish a Jewish community. The relationship of this remnant with the general population was strained at best since the facts of the Lithuanian public's activities during the war spoke volumes about their view of the Jews.<sup>43</sup> Elie Wiesel said of the Holocaust: "Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims."

Along with the efforts of many ordinary Jews in Lithuania to reconstruct their lives on the ruins of the past, an increasing number sought to leave the country and settle elsewhere. Some could not tolerate living in a country that had become one large Jewish cemetery; others recoiled from daily contact with the Lithuanian murderers that were living freely; and still others could no longer bear life under the Soviet Regime.<sup>44</sup>

After the war some Lithuanian collaborators were brought to trial. Internal politics and the Communist approach to the matter of who was a war criminal led to many of the accused being freed. It was rare that the punishment matched the enormity of the crimes. Official documents and the few monuments erected by the Soviets purposely omitted the fact that the men and women who were executed there were overwhelmingly Jewish. The victims tended to be described as Soviet citizens or just inhabitants.

The Soviets also required all schools in Lithuania to use Russian as their main language of instruction. This resulted in the drop of Yiddish-speaking children in Lithuania to almost zero. In the census of 1959, 69 percent of Lithuanian Jewry declared Yiddish as their mother tongue. By 1989, the figure had dropped to 35 percent. While still a significant portion of the population, the absolute number of Yiddish speakers in Europe was nearly insignificant. For a short period after the war and before most of the remaining Jews left the country, there was some attempt to restart Jewish day schools and to publish Yiddish periodicals. All of these attempts were short-lived - the fewer than

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<sup>43</sup> Levin, *The Litvaks*, 235, 236.

<sup>44</sup> Levin, *The Litvaks*, 239.

2,000 Jews living in the country at the time seemed more separated from the rest of their countrymen than they had at any time other than during the war.

*Glasnost* brought with it a change in attitude toward the Holocaust. There was a renewed desire to bring to trial the Stalinist functionaries who had committed serious crimes during the war. Literally hundreds of thousands of people were sent to Siberia during this period, although many of those considered patriots who were not sent were in fact enthusiastic collaborators with the Nazis. The latter part of the 1980s also brought to Lithuania many of the Jews who had been allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Returnees swelled the Jewish population in the country to about 5,000 by 1991.<sup>45</sup>

When Lithuania regained its independence in 1991 the society regained some of its cultural freedoms. This led to the establishment of a number of Jewish cultural centers as well as a few Hebrew schools and the reopening of the State Jewish Museum in Vilna. A Jewish newspaper, called *Jerusalem of Lithuania*, was started and circulated that generally stressed the positive relations the Jews had with the Lithuanians and their loyalty to the country. Still, the Lithuanian papers of the time tended to focus their attention on those few countrymen who actually protected some Jews during the war. The new government also issued a law that forgave those who had been convicted of opposing the Soviet regime, which had the consequence of harsh public reaction in the West. This was because many of those freed by this law had been collaborators and known murderers during the war. The government agreed to some concessions. There was an attempt to restore the graves of 'genocide victims' and to help preserve the cultural history of the Jews. The significance of this action resonated with the Jewish need to keep the memory correct, pure and alive.

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<sup>45</sup> <<http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Archive/Vilna.asp>> (18 April 2005).

At the International Conference on Confronting History that took place in Riga, Latvia, in May 1998, the decision was made to research the consequences of the occupations of the Baltic States during the war. In early fall of the same year the International Commission for the Evaluation of Crimes of the Occupational Regimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupations of Lithuania was born. That group demanded the examination of the Holocaust together with the latter “time of evil”– the Soviet occupation. A mere forty years after the war found more and more people, mainly the young, less interested in what happened during the time of the Nazis and more focused on the recent troubles suffered by Lithuanians by the hands of the Soviets. The pervasive silence of the Lithuanian majority towards their complicity in the atrocious acts of murder during the war made their guilt, at least for the more liberal intelligentsia, more burdensome. The Lithuanian President at that time finally agreed to convene the aforementioned commission on confronting history.<sup>46</sup>

Ponar was a particularly troublesome memory for modern Lithuania. In his article entitled “From Jerusalem of Lithuania to Ponar: The Lithuanian - Jewish Relationship through the Holocaust Perspective,” Vigantas Varyakis pointed out that there were particular reasons in the early stages of the war why his countrymen willingly collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. Some wanted Jewish property and others wanted revenge for family members who were exiled to Siberia by the Soviets. Yet others participated in the war crimes because they were forced to by the German military. Later in the war, Special Lithuanian Police Units, comprised mainly of the lower socio-

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<sup>46</sup> Markas Zingeris, “Commission for the Historical Truth, and the Reshaping of Public Mentatlity in the new Republic of Lithuania: Issues of Holocaust Research and the Dissemination of Knowledge.” <[http://www.yadvashem.org/about\\_yad/departments/institute/conferences\\_markus\\_zingeris](http://www.yadvashem.org/about_yad/departments/institute/conferences_markus_zingeris)> (21 September 4)

economic strata, aided in the extermination of the Jews. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the social situation in Lithuania by their acts of violence against the Jews. The Special Vilna Unit comprised of more than one hundred Lithuanians murdered tens of thousands of the Vilna ghetto inhabitants especially at Ponar. The Germans looked at the deaths of the Jews as the extermination of vermin from the face of the earth whereas the Lithuanian collaborators viewed the deaths as new clothes and money for their families. This article is indicative of the current trend of Lithuanian scholars to legitimize or to excuse heinous acts of the past.<sup>47</sup> Varyakis attempted to cover up the very real anti-Semitic attitude that was ingrained in his countrymen for most of Lithuania's history. Jews, who also had things to be embarrassed about in their political lives before the war, were also guilty of ignoring truths.<sup>48</sup> Jewish scholars must try to interject into the county's discussion an awareness of the reality of what occurred so that the record will be complete and accurate.

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<sup>47</sup> Vigantis Varyakis, "From Jerusalem of Lithuania to Ponar" < [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org) > (September 2000)

<sup>48</sup> Dov Levin, telephone interview by author, (6 December 2004). Translated by author.

## Conclusion

Vilna's Jews for generations were a "treasure trove of contradictions. They laid the foundations for Socialism and popular Zionism, as well as of Modern Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian Jewish literature. They esteemed at one and the same time both the sacred and the subversive – tradition and the barricades – emotional dryness and inveterate intellectualism."<sup>49</sup> Throughout the ages, Jewish life in Lithuania and Vilna was a light to Jews in the far flung- Diaspora. It is said that, other than Jerusalem in Israel, more has been written about Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, than any other Jewish center. And yet, the glory of the past resulted in the death of all but a handful of those who contributed so much to the world. Reviewing the history of the community and the amazing cultural and spiritual achievements would cause one to conclude that it was because of this background that the Jews of wartime Vilna were able to create an effective resistance.

It is true that "there is no longer any doubt that the history of the Eastern European communities in the Second World War, drenched as it is with tears and blood, is also the history of resistance"<sup>50</sup> But it is also true that the glorious religious advances of these people did not have a significant impact on the actual creation of the resistance movements or their effectiveness. The influx of people during the short period of Lithuanian independence brought with it secular Jews from Poland, Russia and elsewhere who were ultimately the prime architects of the FPO. The religious influence was more evident in the cultural resistance of the ghetto Jews in maintaining their tradition and

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Skakun, "An Act of Painstaking Literary Resurrection: Herman Kruk's Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto", < [www.aufbauonline.com/2002/issue20/17.html](http://www.aufbauonline.com/2002/issue20/17.html) > (20 November 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Dov Levin and Zvi A. Brown, *The Story of an Underground: The Resistance of the Jews of Kovno (Lithuania) in the Second World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publishing, 1962), 6.

education in spite of the obvious dangers. The FPO and the partisans of the forest may have had no real influence on the outcome of the war, and certainly did not lead to many more Jews surviving the Nazi onslaught. But they clearly had an affect on the eventual creation of Israel. The FPO also offered the survivors of the Holocaust a symbol of pride, showing that not all were led to slaughter like sheep. Dov Levin, one of the primary historical chroniclers of this time, said correctly: "The urge to fight and resist was something of value."<sup>51</sup>

The fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s brought changes not only in Soviet Russia itself but also in the countries under its influence, including Lithuania. The Jews were largely free to start rebuilding their communities according to their needs. Into the organizational void came a number of Jewish groups from other countries, mainly Israel and America. Emissaries from Israel came to Vilna to establish camps and educational programs as well as a non-denominational Jewish day school. Around the same time, the *Habad Hassidut* became active in setting up an orthodox day school for children and also sent an orthodox Rabbi to lead services in Vilna.

### **Modern Jewish Vilna**

The only Jewish paper that is still published in Vilna today – *Jerusalem of Lithuania* - is published in four languages today – English, Lithuanian, Yiddish and Russian and represents a unique phenomenon in the Jewish world since no other single Jewish publication is issued in all of these languages. The reason for the multiple language presentation was to build a bridge of mutual understanding with Lithuanians by using their language. Yiddish was meant to bring local Jews back to their roots and to revive their national identity. Russian was also part of the presentation because during the

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<sup>51</sup> Levin and Brown, *The Story of an Underground*, 10.

Soviet occupation many Jews were forced to learn it as their main language. Finally, English was used to connect to the large *Litvak* community that exists in the English speaking world. The newspaper continues to publish in 2005 and continues to provide their readers with articles about the life of Jews in Israel and around the world and to acquaint the readers with the rich history of the Lithuanian Jews.

The population of approximately 5,000 Jews in Lithuania (mainly in Vilna) remained mostly steady over the last decade of the twentieth century, but may be in decline now. Nevertheless, there are a number of constructive things happening in Vilna today. The pre-war cemetery of the community is being refurbished. The Jewish Vilna *Gaon* State Museum that opened in 1989 continues to thrive while showing modern Jewish art. A permanent exhibition on “The Lost World” focuses on pre-war Vilna. The Vilnius Yiddish Institute in the city is the first post-holocaust Yiddish center of higher learning in Eastern Europe and is dedicated to preserving the heritage of the language. A Jewish community center was built, also in 1989, and acts as the central meeting point for the Jewish community to help maintain a cohesive national identity.<sup>52</sup>

An article was published in the *Smithsonian* of December 2004 entitled “Vilnius Remembered.” Written by Vijai Maheshwari, it noted that a number of ambitious efforts have begun in Vilna to restore the central core of the pre-war ghetto to celebrate “Lithuanians once-flourishing center of Eastern European Jewish culture.” There is also an effort to organize a small Holocaust museum based on the photographs and documents secretly collected during the Soviet occupation by a Lithuanian woman. A monument was also erected to honor the memory of Chiune Sugihara, often called the Japanese Oskar Schindler. There is even a plan to rebuild parts of the destroyed Jewish quarter and

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander Rutenberg, Telephone interview by author. (20 March 2005). Translated by author.

to reconstruct the great synagogue built in the 1630s. The lack of money for these projects prevents many from even getting started. According to Alexander Rutenberg, the Director of the Lithuanian Fund for Jewish Culture in Vilna, there have been many promises made for money to fund some of these projects but very little actual cash has flowed into the community.<sup>53</sup> The former Jewish Theater has been reconstructed and is now called the Tolerance Center. It was financed by the German Embassy, the Foundation of the French government, the Lithuanian government, as well as the Delegation of the European Commission in Lithuania.<sup>54</sup> The fact that this center was funded in this manner highlights the never ending attempts by all those in Europe to find ways to placate their guilt over the events of the war by way of contributing funds. Nevertheless, it has made a positive impact on the current community of Vilna.

With all the wonderful superstructure and organizational help that has flooded into the city, the question still remains as to whether or not an almost comatose community can ever re-acquire the vigor of its past. The leaders of the religious and non-religious segments continue to engage in a power struggle for the control and leadership of the group. It is reminiscent of the struggles of old between the *mitnagdim* and the *Chasidim*, but in a much smaller arena and with the very survival of the Jewish community at stake. The schism threatens to tear apart what had been a gradual improvement in their circumstances. This even led to the worldwide embarrassment of seeing the only functioning synagogue in Vilna being closed during the High Holiday period in 2004. The secular leader of the community had the orthodox rabbi physically removed from the temple - televised, of course, along with the weeping crowd outside.

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<sup>53</sup> Rutenberg interview.

<sup>54</sup> Email interview with author. (16 March 2005).



While it is true that the orthodox rabbi had initially created the tension - because he made it clear that he was coming to the temple to lead the services his way and would not offer an inclusive one - it is also true that the whole affair was a political power struggle made very public.<sup>55</sup>

In an interview with the author, Dov Levin says that some members of the Vilna group “won’t stop at anything to make money, even if the building is on the graves of the dead.” In other words, there is a strong undercurrent of concern that many of these activities are undertaken not purely to help in recapturing the lost glory that was Vilna, but rather as a means to attract foreign visitors and foreign currency to the community. The current administration of Lithuania has offered reparations to survivors with the stipulation that they obtain Lithuanian citizenship before the money would be paid. The age and geographical distance for the few that remain living certainly prevents some from taking advantage of this offer. But more feel that they could never again set foot in the land that flowed with their family’s blood.

### **Yiddish**

The language of Yiddish in many ways became a metaphor for what happened to the European Jewish community during and after the War. When millions of Yiddish speakers were annihilated throughout Europe in the Holocaust it seemed the end of the road for both the people and the language. The small remnant that survived distanced itself from the past by pointedly not teaching the “Jewish” language to their offspring. Yiddish had been a contributing factor to the cohesiveness of the community across national boundaries and the language of choice for discussing politics and science. Once

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<sup>55</sup> “The Crisis in Vilna,” < <http://www.jewishlithuania.com/templates/articlecco.html?AID=168794> > (8 December 2004).

the people were forced away from their native areas and resurrected in a new land – Israel. Yiddish, the symbol of what was, had to be cast off so as not to allow for constant reminders of a painful and recent past. Hebrew was the language for the “new Jew” who was not a victim and not required to maintain a separate identity from the national one. Yiddish had distinguished the Jews in Europe from their surroundings. The future was to be that the Jews would take their natural place as equals in the community of man.

Yiddish started out as a unifying force for the Jews of Europe, separating them from the rest. In time, it began to separate Jews themselves according to their political and religious predilections. After 1948, Yiddish became a symbol of the shameful past and was discarded by all but a small, orthodox, part of the society and thus again is a separating force within the Jewish world. In fact, the majority of active Yiddish speakers in the world today are the ultra-religious Jews and a small number of Survivors. YIVO moved its center to New York City in 1940 and became mainly a repository of historical works. It was not until very recently that a Yiddish revival of sorts has begun in Israel, America and Vilna. There are once again schools and universities that teach the language and there are some magazines and some literature that is being published in this once proud language around the world. Yiddish came close to being a candle extinguished, just as 95% of the Jewish population of Vilna was lost to the world. The attempt to revive the Jewish community in Vilna parallels that community’s attempt to embrace a special and unique voice that was once heard loud and clear throughout the Jewish world.

## Looking Ahead

The question of whether Vilna can recover its great heritage and spirit from times past is yet to be answered. The evidence does not give an observer much hope that a fledgling Jewish community that is far from cohesive will ever regain even a modest portion of their cultural and religious legacy. The real Jerusalem of the East has its rightful place in Jewish life and is recognized by the Jews of the Diaspora as being the capital of modern Israel. The *Litvak* community that is concentrated in North America, the U. K., Australia and South Africa are proud of their Lithuanian heritage but are strong supporters of Israel and are not likely to encourage anyone to go back to their homeland. Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the famous Jewish thinker and rabbi of the twentieth century, once said, "What lends meaning to history... is the promise of the future." The future of the Jewish people resides in the State of Israel. Virtually all of the Eastern European Jewish communities were successfully eradicated by the Nazis. There may be occasional pockets of Jewish renewal somewhere on the continent but, at least in Vilna, the Holocaust seems to have claimed another victim – perhaps for all time.

There are stars long extinguished, the light of which continues to illuminate the earth. The memories of the Jews of Vilna, like those celestial lights, have become a part of the fabric of the character of the modern state of Israel. In this way, their light will continue to shine through the ages.

*Transcription of Interview with Nissan Reznik*  
11-14-04

Interviewer – Chaya Kessler (CK)  
Interviewee – Nissan Reznik (NR)

Translated from the Hebrew

CK When did you arrive in Vilna and how old were you?

NR I arrived in Vilna in 1940 and I was 24 years old. There were Zionist movements in Poland and we all thought that from Vilna it would be easier to leave Europe. Lithuania was not Communist at the time and was known to be the way out. Many went to Israel and many religious Jews managed to go to America.

CK And you stayed?

NR I stayed because my movement (Ha'Noar Ha'Tzioni – General Zionist youth movement) asked me to stay to help organize and that's how I ended up in the ghetto. In the ghetto we organized the resistance movement and then we joined the partisans. After the war I came back to Vilna and I helped to organize the escape from Russia to the LAND (Israel.)

CK What would you say was unique about Vilna in terms of the organization of the resistance?

NR What was unique about Vilna was that the different Zionist movements came to the conclusion that what was really happening was a total annihilation of the Jews by the Germans and we understood that we would be fighting against the German Empire. We knew we would not be able to succeed in defeating them so we decided to resist. We said that they (the Germans) will not be the ones to decide for us how we would die. We did not believe that we would live through the war so we decided that it would be our choice as to how and when we would die. But destiny left us alive. The resistance was going to be from the ghetto to instigate an uprising.

CK So why wasn't there an uprising in the Vilna ghetto?

NR This is what really happened. The Germans used the Judenrat to execute their work in the ghetto. Gens was the head of the Judenrat and was convinced that he could save the Jews by not fighting the Germans and many of those in the ghetto believed him. We did not believe it but we were afraid that if we had an uprising that we would have to fight the Jews as well as the Nazis. So we changed our approach and we left the ghetto to join the Partisans.

CK Who stayed and who left?

NR The Pioneer youth movements organized the young people in the underground into groups. These groups left Vilna and joined the Partisans. The partisans were not ready to accept everyone, only the young, and really only the young who had weapons. Although, when we got there, they ended up taking the weapons from us and we had to find different weapons.

CK Which forest did you go to?

NR The first group of 150 to 180 young people Narodz forest. Afterwards the others went to Rodnicky.

CK How did you manage to get the weapons?

NR We got them originally from the ghetto by smuggling them out underneath dead bodies that we being removed from the ghettos. The Germans thought that we were taking only the dead but inside we had boxes with weapons. It was only by luck that we were not caught. We brought the weapons to the cemetery and waited there until nightfall at which time the partisans came and from there we went to the forest.

CK Who were the partisans in the forest?

NR They were mostly Russians. The Communist party was in charge and they decided what to do and we joined them.

CK By 'we' you mean the FPO?

NR Yes.

CK How were they as an organization? Were there any conflicts between the members of the FPO?

NR The FPO was a very organized movement. In the ghetto we tried to get weapons and to train the members to use them.

CK When you arrived at the forest, did the FPO continue to work as an organized group?

NR No, when we got to the forest the partisans did not recognize the FPO. The Communist party was in charge and they made all the major decisions. They accepted us and took our weapons – and that's the way it was.

CK Were there also women in your group?

NR Yes, of course. There were many female members that joined us in the forest.

CK Did the men and the women have the same assignments?

NR We went on different assignments. My wife was there and was a courageous partisan.

CK How was the life in the forest? How did you get food?

NR We stole food from the farmers by force since we had no money or any way to buy it. The partisans would go to the farmers houses and take the food. Later on, the Soviet army used to throw food from the airplanes for us. But mainly we had to take it from the farmers. August of 1944, I came back to Vilna and I realized that there was nothing left for me there. The pioneer movements started to do some information campaigns among the Jews and started organizing the escape routes. From Vilna to Poland, from Poland to Rumania, from there to Italy and from there to Israel (Palestine.) This was our activity. We laid the foundation for the survivors to leave Europe.

CK When did you arrive in Israel?

NR I arrived in 1947. I was a member of Kibbutz Nitzanim. In 1948 I was captured along with many from my Kibbutz by the Egyptians and held as a prisoner.

CK Can you tell me about your time in prison?

NR The prison in Egypt was a very difficult period. At least at the beginning they treated us very harshly. But we had an English soldier with us who had served in the Egyptian consulate. He too was captured. He managed to escape because he knew the area well. He ran away at night and got back to Israel and told the authorities how they were treating us. In the meantime, in Israel there were over 5,000 Egyptian prisoners. The Israeli army started treating them like we were being treated. In 2 to 3 weeks the situation improved and they started treating us according to the law.

CK Did you come back to Israel by way of a prisoner exchange?

NR Yes, there was an exchange and we came back to the kibbutz.

CK Where do you live now?

NR I live in Ramat Gan.

CK Can I ask you a few questions about your relationship with Abba Kovner?

NR Yes, you can ask me anything you want.

CK Do you think that there is a change of attitude or atmosphere within the Israeli society toward the Holocaust that allows for a new look at the events?

NR Look, I want to tell you... We are already sixty years after the Holocaust. When we arrived in Israel the settlement needed stories of heroism so everyone became fighters, partisans and heroes. I, from the first moment, was of the opinion that our fight against the Germans inflicted no more harm than a scratch. What could we do? We lacked even a piece of bread so survival was the main issue. We stole weapons were we could but we couldn't accomplish much. And that is why I did not write about this subject for many years. In the book I describe the period as if it was yesterday and I explain that we were pessimists. We were sure that no would survive that period. We were hoping that if any Jews survived after the war that they would tell the story of the resistance. There were some Jews that resisted.

CK But you wrote the book – why did you wait so long to write it?

NR First, I lived on the kibbutz for a period of time. Then I was sent to South America as an emissary of the Jewish people. Coming back, my wife could not get used to living on a kibbutz and we left. Then I went to the university to study accounting. I had to make a living. Second, I knew that how I would write the book when I eventually wrote it. I did not accept the opinion that we made big waves or a big difference during the war. We just picked at them doing what we could do. We didn't want them to kill us. We were going to choose how to die. And one more thing you should know, that in Vilna there was unity. As soon as we started to organize the FPO, we all worked together accepting all those who wanted to resist. All the parties and all the bodies. We all worked together in unity and understanding.

CK Did this happen in other places in Eastern Europe as well?

NR No. Other places, like Warsaw for example, saw constant conflicts between the many movements including who to accept as members of the underground movement. In Vilna, from the first moment we came to the conclusion that we had no chance to remain alive. We also decided that we were all equal – we realized they were killing Jews, not parties. Since we were all Jews, there was unity. After the war, everyone came up and “took the cake for themselves.”

CK Do you mean Abba Kovner specifically?

NR Kovner was a writer, a poet and had the ability to express himself. At that time he was not the one who created the underground organization. At the time he was sitting with the Christians. The Polish Christians knew the members of the Ha'Shomeret Ha'Tzair group from before the War. The Christian leader, Yadviga, who loved Jews, took 18 members, including Kovner, add him them in the monastery outside of Vilna. That's where they were when we put together the idea and formed the resistance in the ghetto. After we decided what to do and what to write in a pamphlet, one of the members who was from Ha'Shomeret Ha'Tzair suggested that we use a fellow named Kovner, who was very talented, to write the pamphlet. We had already formalized the ideas.

CK So you came up with the basic ideas in the ghetto?

NR Yes. Then Kovner came to the ghetto and read the pamphlet that he had written. After the war he came and said that he did it all and that he started the underground movement. In my book I don't attack Kovner or anyone else. I only present the picture the way it was. I don't talk about myself and my role. I only tell the story the way it was. Kovner came and he took. So he took... he claimed his part. I think that he had a part in that he was in the underground and he was active. I don't mean to accuse him or be derogatory towards him.

CK So you and Kovner parted ways?

NR Yes, we each lived in a separate kibbutz and we didn't speak to each other for many years.

CK Did you invite him to your daughter's wedding in 1988?

NR Yes and he came. He was a big egotist even with his closest friends. After the War when we were free, each one went his own way.

CK When you were in the Egyptian prison, Kovner wrote a public statement saying that you and your comrades should have fought to the death. What was your reaction and response to that?

NR He wrote not only about me but about the whole kibbutz. Eventually the government rescinded the statement he published and everyone understood that we did all we could.

CK How did you manage to get organized in Vilna and how did it differ from other places in Eastern Europe?

NR In Poland before the war there was a central committee of all the Zionist movements. The committee dealt with all the issues concerning the Zionist organization between the elders and the pioneers. Who was going to do what. When we came to Vilna, we renewed this central council and called it the pioneer coordination committee. When we came to the ghetto we saw what we had and we started to understand that we needed to help and depend on each other. Those who were active in Vilna understood that there is no difference between the Bundists, the revisionists or the Zionists. There was full cooperation from the first moment.

CK You sound tired. Can I call you again if I have any other questions?

NR You can call me any time and ask me anything you want.



*Transcription of Interview with Professor Dov Levin*  
12-6-04

Interviewer – Chaya Kessler (CK)

Interviewee – Dov Levin (DL)

Translated from the Hebrew by Chaya Kessler

CK - What is the situation today with the Lithuanian Jewish community and the general population and government there?

DL - Well, I was there five times and I lectured in the University and had many conversations with them. Not everybody accepts me there. There are those who can't stand me because I remind them of the past. So that is why I stayed alive. But, they respect me. So now to the point. The main point is the Jewish community is dwindling every year. Today, I believe, there are no more than 2,500 maximum Jews in Vilna.

CK - I read an article in the recent *Smithsonian Magazine* (Dec. 2004) that estimates the current Jewish population at 4,000.

DL - This is a total exaggeration. She probably doesn't know statistics. The Jews there have a double complex. Those who are the head of the community were also those who were the heads of the Jewish Communist establishment. Like Alperovitch [the current head of the Vilna Jewish Community], for example. He and his family were also known at the time of the Soviets as accomplices of the Communists. And then, overnight, they became nationalists. So they all know each other and cover up for each other – there are mutual cover-ups. You don't tell what I did and I won't tell about you. Because otherwise you don't talk about who was a communist since there many Lithuanians and Jews who suffered from the Communists. There is a gentleman's agreement about not talking about what the Lithuanians did before and during the War. So let us not talk at all about what the Lithuanians did and, if we do, we say that the Germans were the worst, then came the Russians and after them the Lithuanians. And so they shoot two rabbits at once. First of all they exonerate themselves and second, they say what is accepted - that the Soviets were responsible. In point of fact, if any Jews remained alive in Lithuania, it's only due to the Soviets –that's a fact. Those Jews left in Vilna are those who have family ties there – married to a Lithuanian. Today we forgive so this way there is cover up from both sides, the Jews and the Lithuanians. You can't lie to everybody always so what do you do? There is a technique of cosmetics. First you say that there were also good Lithuanians – those who saved Jews.

CK - I saw on the internet on that the Lithuanian government web site about the admission that they were also involved in the massacre of Jews before and during the war.

DL - They themselves – the Lithuanians – want to be accepted in the West. They knew that those who write positive things about Jews will have access to the West. The trend is to go out to the West, Germany for example. There are those who write articles and I get them all. Everything in Lithuania is a very complicated structure that's artificially constructed beginning with the political aspect. On the political level, their desire to be accepted in the West is a little less since they were accepted in the EU and NATO.

CK - What are the politics within the current Jewish community like at this point?

DL - Well there is the old school with Alperovitch, who is a survivor and then there is Emanuel Zingeris who is married to a non-Jewish Lithuanian. He sells Judaism. Each one of them has a minister in the government who supports him. They are both politically motivated and they have different views on how to lead the community. The other motivation is economic. They want to make money by drawing the tourists who really love the Jews so they fix up the old Jewish cemetery so that it's nicely presented and attractive to tourists. As to the internet article, the Lithuanian government saw that the whole world knows about the Lithuanian participation in the killing of the Jews so the best thing to do was to admit a little.

CK - Was there an admission by the current Lithuanian government of their complicity in the atrocities? Have they made a formal apology?

DL - In 1995, the President of Lithuania came to Israel and spoke to the Knesset. He asked for forgiveness half heartedly saying that the Lithuanians were also involved, meaning that they were not the only ones who did it. The truth is that the Lithuanians were the worst. They were the ones who murdered, who raped, who abused in the most brutal way and enjoyed doing it. Those are the known facts.

CK - It is known that the Germans paid reparations – have the Lithuanians?

DL - They are doing all sorts of things in order not to pay. First they said that you have to be a Lithuanian citizen but of course you have to become a citizen of the country. I for one don't. Is this why I remained alive? Now I can be a tough guy. This is my revenge. I'm here in Israel and I don't want to get back my land or the family's factories. I'm only a private person. There are other Jews who do want their property or business back. When the President of Lithuania came back from Israel he said that they almost lynched him in the newspapers for what he said in Israel. They accused him of being a traitor.

CK - How is the cultural life of the Jews in Vilna these days?

DL - They have one newspaper – *Yerushalayim de Lita*. I wrote a few things for them from the Hebrew University. One of the things they published in my name was that in at least thirty villages the slaughter of the Jews started before the first German ever entered Lithuania. They published the article and Alporovitch was reprimanded for publishing it so like always – you have to be politically correct.

CK - When I was in Vilna last summer the Synagogue was closed. What's the status now?

DL - Alperovitch closed the Synagogue. I called him on the phone and asked him how he could possibly do that. How is he not embarrassed? Even the Cossacks didn't close the Temple. Even at the time of the Nazis the Great Synagogue in Vilna was always open. This is politics between Jews. Alperovitch told me that he'll show them who the boss is. The Chasidic Rabbi is not such a nice guy and is not so sympathetic. Maybe he's also a fanatic but for this to close a Synagogue? He should be ashamed.

CK - Getting back to the Lithuanians and the Jews, can you describe how it all is being settled now?

DL - In the past it was a hard time. There were Lithuanians who killed Jews but there were also those who saved Jews. The government learned to do a symmetrical equation. This is not a good thing to do. There are some Lithuanians whom I respect who saved Jews. I don't know if I would have done that but – there were very few. Those who did it out of pure moral conviction. The others had very calculated motives. After Stalingrad in the winter, they saw that the end of the Germans was at hand therefore they wanted to have some insurance so they found some Jews and “saved them.” There were also those who turned them in to the Germans! So the Lithuanians are angry at me because I say the murderous Lithuanians. It's not politically correct to say. Most Lithuanians either murdered or turned the Jews over to the Nazis. More so than the German people. A small portion of the Lithuanians were righteous motivated by pure morals. There was a third group – those who only looked on and didn't help but waited for the Jews to be killed. Then they admitted to taking the clothing, furs and material goods from the Jews and selling it to get money for Vodka.

CK - Thank you so much for your time.

*Transcription of Phone Interview with Alexander Rutenberg*  
03-15-05

Interviewer - Chaya Kessler (CK)

Interviewee - Alexander Rutenberg (AR)

Translated from Russian by Chaya Kessler

CK - Introduction and explanation (background) for questions.

CK - Are you involved in the Jewish Center and how many Jews are involved in the Jewish Center?

AR – 2,500 to 3,000 come often to the center.

CK - How many Jews in Vilna now?

AR – around 4,000 at this time.

CK How many Jews live in all of Lithuania?

AR – Around 5,000 in all of Lithuania.

CK – How many people feel their Jewish because of connection to Temple or Center?

AR – Many more people attend the Jewish Center than the Temple. During the High Holidays, about 200-300 people attended synagogue.

CK – What does the Jewish Center offer in terms of programs?

AR – They offer everything, whatever the 'JDC normally offers. JDC funds the Center.

CK – Do they have any programs for children and do they offer studies of Torah?

AR – Yes, many. We also have Sunday school for religious studies for kids.

CK – Are there many mixed marriages?

AR – Yes, but it's not seen as unusual or uncommon and is not frowned upon.

CK – how much intermarriage with others outside of the faith?

AR – 50/50, some with Russians and some with Lithuanians.

CK – Do the Jews living in Lithuania now feel closer to the Russians or the Lithuanians because there used to be feelings of anti-Semitism from the Lithuanians?

AR – There is not much difference – over the last 15 years it hasn't made much difference. There is not a question any more in our time because parts of the Jews in the community now are from Lithuania, the rest from Russia since 1985. They were going to go to Germany or other countries but because of tougher immigration laws they ended up staying in Lithuania.

CK – Do they teach Holocaust in the schools?

AR – Yes, besides there is one Jewish State school and one Chasidic school. Ten years ago the Rabbi came and we helped in to start up his school.

CK – There was a very negative incident with the Chasidic Rabbi at last year's High Holiday services at the Temple. How do the people feel about that incident now?

AR – They feel badly because it was such an embarrassment. The Rabbi was the provocateur, at least in Vilna, and most people here think he should leave and go to where he came from. This is my opinion. Other parts of the country seem to get along better with him. I've known him for 10 years and his level of improper behavior towards others is very high.

CK – Is the Rabbi unpleasant to everyone or just Jews?

AR – He's unpleasant to everyone, it's his personality.

CK – How many Jews came from Russia to Vilna?

AR – About half of the community. The biggest immigration to Vilna from Russia came in 1982 -1985. They did not go back because of anti-Semitism in Russia, but mostly because the economy is not good there. Comparing anti-Semitism in Russia to Lithuania is like day and night. We can presume that there is anti-Semitism in Lithuania but we know it exists in Russia. No one runs after us with an axe here.

CK – Is there any Jewish newspapers?

AR – Yes, it's called Jerusalem of Lithuania and is published in Yiddish, Russian and English.

CK – Do they teach Yiddish at the University?

AR – Yes, they have a Yiddish Institute there. The director is David Katz from NY who is very active and very much liked. Formally, we have all of the institutions that are necessary in a civilized society so in that sense we are no different than anyone else. We have freedom in Lithuania for our Jewish life – we're certainly in much better shape than

in France. I cannot comment on Eastern Europe but France strikes me in my face much more than other places.

CK – Tell me about the rebuilding of the ghetto.

AR – The local government is discussing the issue and we Jews are pushing to reconstruct the ghetto but right now there is a big problem because of the ownership of the land. It makes it more difficult. The president of Lithuania is in Israel for the opening of the new *Yad Vashem* Holocaust museum. They are discussing offering citizenship to anyone who emigrated from Lithuania after the War. It's a big deal. Citizenship leads to questions on ownership of the land. Because of this the discussion of what do with the ghetto area and even the reconstruction that had begun is now slowing down.

CK – What do the Jews of Vilna think – should the ghetto be reconstructed?

AR – It all depends on the intellectual level of the people. The intellectuals think it should happen, the rest don't much care. There is no consensus. Lithuanian intellectuals support the reconstruction of the ghetto because it's a page of the history of Lithuania. They consider it a part of the history – the Jews lived here for 700 years and they don't have any doubts about it. The idea of the Lithuanian parliament is to build on some of the empty spaces where there used to be Jewish religious or secular buildings. They have talked about rebuilding the largest synagogue – the Coral Temple. The Jewish leaders are discussing whether to build the entire synagogue or just a portion of it like they've done in Warsaw. It's impractical and it used to seat 4,000 Jews so there's no way.

CK – Where would you get the funds to rebuild?

AR – We would get the money from private investors but right now things are still in the discussion stage. If you want to know the truth, we're not getting any money and it would only be per project, based on each project.

CK – What about Israel – are they helping?

AR – No, they all want us to move to Israel and stand by the Wailing Wall.

CK – What about from the United States Jewish community?

AR – Promises but nothing else.

CK – What do you think is the future of the Jews in Lithuania and Vilna?

AR – It will be the same as now. We're not going to have any pogroms and no one will chase us but anti-Semitism is in the genes of the Lithuanians so who knows? In Russia there will be bloodshed very soon.

CK – Do you think more Russian Jews will come to Lithuania?

AR – No, because the borders are closed. They can come as guests but they can't get a visa.

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