

## Reconnecting the Past and Present at the Vilna/Vilnius Jewish Library

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**Description:** The Vilnius Jewish Public Library, the first Jewish library in Lithuania since World War II, opened in 2011 thanks to the initiative of Mr. Wyman Brent. His goal was to establish a cultural institution for Jews and Gentiles that would foster compassion, respect, and responsibility for all members of the community. By 2014, the Vilnius Jewish Public Library made significant improvements, especially in the areas of collection development, the management of public relations, and the unification of the local community. However, the library website and its social networks provided very little information about the history of Jewish libraries in Vilna. This paper will explore how to create a bridge between the past and the present for the Jewish Public Library through an exhibition of digitized primary source materials that tells the story of the community built around the Strashun and Ghetto libraries in Vilna. Allowing the primary sources to tell the story of the Vilna Jewish Library's past makes the Vilnius Jewish Public Library community more versatile, diverse, and not limited by geographic borders.

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This presentation will focus on the past and present of Vilna/Vilnius Jewish libraries. I will share my thoughts on the new consensus on the organizational purposes of Vilnius Jewish Public Library, an emerging institution. A consensus on important future tasks can be achieved by examining the history of Vilna's great libraries that fostered global civilization that is no longer exists in Vilnius.

I will discuss this topic from my own vantage point, that is, as a professional librarian whose interest lies in the relationship between libraries, living communities and communities of memory. For several years I conducted research focused on the role of civil societies and benevolent organizations in the communal solidarity of Eastern European Jewry. Though the focus of that study was not on the role of libraries per se, I discovered several historical examples that led me to conclude that libraries are a very powerful source for community building as well as the creation and cultivation of future memories.

### **Observations on Vilna Jewish Libraries**

The Jewish Vilna is an example of a diverse Jewish community with a rich tradition of Jewish libraries. The world-famous Strashun Library opened in 1893. It was the first Jewish public library in Eastern Europe. By 1931, the library's holdings exceeded 30,000 volumes. In 1910, the Society for the Spread of Enlightenment opened the *Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah* public library holding more than 15,000 volumes in primarily in Russian but also in other languages. Another Vilna Jewish library was the Ghetto Library, directed by the librarian Herman Kruk. The mere existence of a library in

the ghetto is not only evidence of the moral resistance of Jews to the Nazi oppression, but also demonstrates how libraries are capable of uniting people and providing them with a sense of belonging to communal life, even on threshold of death. There were many other Jewish Libraries in Vilna, including children's libraries and school libraries, a medical library in the Jewish Hospital, the Sirkin book store library for foreign-language publications, and of course the library of the YIVO institute for Jewish research with collection of 40,000 titles.

This is a summary of the history of Jewish libraries in Vilna. All of these libraries paved the way for the Vilnius Jewish Public Library, the first Jewish Library in Lithuania since World War II.

### **Opening of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library**

The Vilnius Jewish Public library opened in 2011 thanks to the initiative of Mr. Wyman Brent. Brent is a non-Jewish American activist, writer and artist. In his presentation, *Thinking Outside the Books*, at the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Brent outlined the library's mission and vision in promoting "tolerance, understanding, and ultimate acceptance."<sup>1</sup> His goal in the creation of the Vilnius Jewish Library was to establish a cultural institution for Jews and non-Jews that would foster compassion, respect and responsibility for all members of the community.

At the beginning, Brent's initiative of opening the Jewish Public library in Vilnius was not supported by either the Lithuanian or the Jewish communities. Brent was a stranger to both parties. He was not a Lithuanian and he was not a Jew. He did not speak Lithuanian and he was not a librarian. Brent did not have any connection to the circles of the government officials and the Jewish community leaders. But as the saying goes: "Amateurs built the ark. Professionals built the Titanic." Brent found supporters and the library was built. Vilnius Jewish Public Library is a Lithuanian library in its legal status and its affiliation to the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. It is a Jewish library in its collection and collection development strategy. And most importantly, it is a Lithuanian-Jewish public institution for its mission in community development.

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<sup>1</sup> Brent, Wyman. 2012. "Thinking Outside the Books: The Opening of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library," in *The Proceedings of the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual AJL Conference*. (Pasadena 2012), Accessed June 19, 2015  
<http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17491>

## Conditions for Establishing of the Jewish Public Library in Vilnius

Would it have been possible to establish the Jewish Public Library in Vilnius two decades ago when the communist regime collapsed and Lithuania gained independence in 1990? The answer is no.

In order to make it happen, two conditions would have to be in place to sustain it consistently: the establishment and revival of the Jewish community in Lithuania and the creation of environments for cultural integration of Jewish culture into the Lithuanian society. These necessary conditions would lead to the acceptance Jewish history and culture by the Lithuanians. Both conditions cannot be sustained without rediscovering the Jewish heritage of Lithuania.

Before World War II, there were 250,000 Jews living in Lithuania. Only 20,000 survived the Holocaust. Ninety-five percent of Lithuanian Jews were murdered. It is the highest percentage of Jews killed in Europe during the war. In the postwar years, the Jewish community continued to decrease due to other waves of Stalin's repression and the emigration of Jews to Israel and the United States of America. Today, the Lithuanian Jewish community numbers only around 5,000 people. It is the smallest minority of Lithuanian society.

Physical extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust was not the only action that ruined the rich Jewish communal life in Lithuania. Fifty years of the Soviet regime also destroyed memory of Jewish tradition, its living language, and any sense of Jewish community.

How could the relationship between Lithuanians and Jews be described in the post-WWII period? Professor Tomas Venclova's lecture *Lithuanians and Jews: What's Changed and What Hasn't over the last Forty Years?* may hold an answer. He presented his finding at international conference that focused on the topic of Holocaust education in Vilnius on 17 April 2015. Venclova said: "Lithuanians then, including me, knew practically nothing about Jewish history in Lithuania. The history textbooks of independent Lithuania between the two world wars dedicated at most a half page to Jews... Soviet textbooks didn't mention Jews at all, the word itself seemed profane somehow and it was avoided... Jews were considered "strangers" *par excellence*."<sup>2</sup>

So, what changed in the decades after the fall of communism and collapse of the Soviet Union? In his lecture, Venclova outlines, "Lithuanians and Jews are no longer separate worlds who never cross paths."

According to Vytautas Toleikis, the director of the Lithuanian committee of United World Colleges: "Commemoration of Lithuania's Jewish heritage and

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<sup>2</sup> Venclova, Tomas, "Lithuanians and Jews: What's Changed and What Hasn't over the last Forty Years?" <http://defendinghistory.com/tomas-venclovas-lecture-at-vilnius-conference-on-17-april-2015/73102>, accessed June 19, 2015.

remembrance of Holocaust victims were increasingly permitted and officially promoted as Lithuania came closer to leaving the Soviet Union.”<sup>3</sup> Toleikis listed some milestones in rediscovering of Jewish heritage, steps made to revive the Lithuanian Jewish community and actions taken to build relationships between Jews and Lithuanians.

The rediscovery of Jewish heritage started with opening The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius in 1989. The Sholem Aleichem Jewish Middle School was opened in the same year. Many Jewish organizations were founded at that time. In March 1995, President Algirdas Brazauskas acknowledged the crimes committed by Lithuanians during the Second World War and asked the Knesset for forgiveness. By 2000, the State educational program began to promote learning about Holocaust in the State schools.

Walking through Vilnius today, we can see many commemorative plaques and statues in honor and memory of the famous Jews as well as non-Jews who lived in or were associated with Jewish Vilnius and/or Jewish Lithuania. Here are just a few names of these honorees: Vilna Gaon Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, Theodor Herzl, doctor Zemach Shabad, writer Romain Gary, poet Joseph Brodsky, violinist Jascha Heifetz, the founder of the YIVO institute for Jewish research Max Weinreich, Japanese diplomat and mass rescuer, Chiune Sugihara and librarian Ona Šimaitė. Referring again to Venclova’s lecture, he states: “The great stratum of Litvak culture is no longer alien. If it hasn’t been integrated into Lithuanian culture, I believe the foundation for doing so has already been laid.”<sup>4</sup>

One more important step on the path of cultural integration of Jewish history, traditions and culture into the Lithuanian society was the founding of the Jewish Public Library in Vilnius. The Vilnius Jewish Public library will make its contribution in rallying people into a tolerant and cohesive community, with members of that community interested in Jewish history and culture and perceiving the Litvaks’ history and traditions as an integral part of Lithuanian history and culture.

#### **Evaluation of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library**

My evaluation of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library is based on interviews with the library staff conducted during my two recent visits to Vilnius in 2014 and 2015.

The library holds the status of public library. It is a branch of main Vilnius County Adamas Mickevičius Public Library. The library is located on Gedimino Avenue, the central street of Vilnius, and uses the whole second floor of an office building. Although the façade of the building does not look very attractive, the library’s facility is very pleasant, spacious and light. The library is open Monday through Friday from 11AM to 6:00 PM. The library has a reference desk, computer stations for library patrons, an open stacks area, an office cubical and a large conference room where the ongoing exhibitions are displayed.

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<sup>3</sup>Toleikis, Vytautas, “Repress, Reassess, Remember: Jewish Heritage in Lithuania,” <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-11-27-toleikis-en.html>, accessed June 19, 2015.

<sup>4</sup>Venclova, Tomas, “Lithuanians and Jews: What’s Changed and What Hasn’t over the last Forty Years?” <http://defendinghistory.com/tomas-venclovas-lecture-at-vilnius-conference-on-17-april-2015/73102>, accessed June 19, 2015.

There are two full-time librarians working at the library. They are: the Head Librarian Žilvinas Beliauskas and Žydrūnė Šaulianskaitė, a librarian who provides reference, circulation and some bibliographic and technical services. Both librarians are multilingual. Three volunteers occasionally help with the descriptive cataloging of Yiddish books.

The funding and distributions of the library budget are allocated in the following ways: State funding covers all operational and salary expenses. While, the library collection is supported through public donations. No funds are allocated for the acquisitions of books, media and periodical subscriptions.

The library's holdings are approximately 7,000 volumes, although part of the collection requires additional cataloging. The core of the collection is books donated by Wyman Brent, approximately 5,000 volumes. The rest of the collection are gifts from library patrons, authors and publishers. The library is expecting to receive a donation of several hundred volumes from Haifa University Library. This acquisition will significantly increase the library collection.

The scope of the collection is not limited by any particular subjects since the library concept was based on Brent's idea to collect a wide range of subjects in order "to promote not only Jewish culture but also culture created by Jews."<sup>5</sup> The library collection is multilingual and the core of the collection is English language materials.

The main Vilnius County library provides cataloging services for the Jewish Library. Lithuania uses the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) cataloging system.

According to the library's statistics, 2,215 patrons visited the library in the past year.

The library has 4-5 ongoing exhibitions per year and hosts 20 - 25 events per year, such as: lectures, literary seminars, book presentations, poetry readings, and film showings. The information about upcoming events is posted on the library website and on its Facebook page.

The library maintains bi-lingual Lithuanian/English website. The Facebook postings are also bi-lingual.

The Vilnius Jewish public library received grants from Lithuanian (*Spaudos, radijo ir televizijos rėmimo fondas*) and French organizations (*Institut Français de*

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<sup>5</sup> Brent, Wyman. 2012. "Thinking Outside the Books: The Opening of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library," in *The Proceedings of the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual AJL Conference*. (Pasadena 2012), Accessed June 19, 2015  
<http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17491>

*l'Ambassade de France en Lituanie*) to support the publication of the Lithuanian-Jewish historical and cultural illustrated almanac *Brasta*. Dalija Epstein, a writer and translator is the chief editor of the almanac. The next issue of the almanac will be dedicated to the famous Vilna Jewish doctors and their contribution to the development of health care in Lithuania. It will also be bi-lingual – Lithuanian/English.

By 2015, given the short period of time and relatively small budget and staff, the Vilnius Jewish Public library performed significant accomplishments in terms of collection development, the management of public relations and the unification of the local community. However, the library's website and its social networks provided very little historical information about past Jewish libraries in Vilna. Vilna's rich history of Jewish librarianship is not represented in the collections and resources of today's Vilnius Jewish Library's. The young generation of the Jewish Public library's patrons has no knowledge of the history and traditions of the Jewish Libraries and the communities they created.

Why is the connection to the past of Jewish libraries so important? By rediscovering and re-examining the educational, pedagogical and community solidarity purposes of Vilna's great Jewish libraries, the Vilnius Jewish public library might create a new consensus for implementing this knowledge in pursuing its mission in promoting tolerance and acceptance, as well as for connecting the living community with the community of memory. Who, if not the Jewish public library would disseminate the knowledge about the great Jewish contribution in the tradition of public librarianship in Lithuania? Upon sharing this thought with the Head Librarian Žilvinas Beliauskas, he concurred that rediscovering the traditions of Jewish libraries is a very important aim, although it is hardly feasible right now because of the limitation of staff and funds.

How can we create a bridge between the past and the present at the Jewish Public Library? How can the past be brought to the foreground?

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations should be considered as initial steps toward the dissemination of knowledge of the history of the Vilna Jewish libraries, and the librarians who built and saved the collection of those libraries at the risk to their own lives. The recommendation include:

- Organizing lectures dedicated to various topics of Jewish Librarianship in Vilnius: Strashun Library, Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah library, Sirkin bookstore, Ghetto Library.
- Dedicating the *Brasta* publication to the theme of Vilna or/and Lithuanian Jewish Libraries, or its librarians.
- Creating an annotated bibliography of the sources available at the Vilnius Jewish public library dedicated to that subject and post it on the library website.
- Creating annotated list of links to the Web resources of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Studies and Yad Vashem World Center for Holocaust Research.

Some examples of the Web resources could include:

Strashun Library digital exhibition

[http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital\\_exhibitions/index.php?mid=111&mcid=70](http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital_exhibitions/index.php?mid=111&mcid=70)

Stashun Library at Yad Vashem World Center for Holocaust Research

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/before/libraries.asp>

Ghetto Library at

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/library.asp>

Ona Shimaite biography at

[http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206025.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206025.pdf)

Dina Abramowitz biograph at <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/abramowicz-dina>

The YIVO Vilna project at

[http://yivo.org/images/uploads/images/2015VilnaProject\\_trifold%28lo-res%29.pdf](http://yivo.org/images/uploads/images/2015VilnaProject_trifold%28lo-res%29.pdf)

The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Artifacts of the Vilna Ghetto

[http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital\\_exhibitions/index.php?mid=132&mcid=73](http://www.yivoinstitute.org/digital_exhibitions/index.php?mid=132&mcid=73)

Allowing these sources to tell the impressive story of the Jewish libraries in the past would help to make the Vilnius Jewish Public library community more versatile, diverse, and not limited by geographical borders.

### **Conclusion**

The Lithuanian word *Brasta* has been chosen as the name of the almanac that the library supports to publish. *Brasta* means “wade” or “wade through.” Dalija Epstein, the chief editor of the almanac explained the concept of this title. Allegorically, the history and culture of the Lithuanian Jews went deep under water, and only by carefully crossing the water, step by step, can they see their lost treasure. The Vilnius Jewish Public library is making its *brasta* to discover the remains of lost Lithuanian Jewish heritage in order to reconnect the past and present, and creatively bind living and memory communities for their mutual enrichment.

## WORKS CITED:

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