

New Life for an Old Library: Report from the Vilna Ghetto

by *Ellen Cassedy*

Description: In the Vilna Ghetto during World War II, the ghetto library drew thousands of patrons and circulated more than 100,000 books. Today, a group of young Lithuanians are hoping that the now-empty building, currently owned by the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, will again become a place where Lithuania's magnificent Jewish cultural heritage can be remembered, mourned, and honored. The first event – a reading of poetry by ghetto prisoner Avrom Sutzkever, in Lithuanian translation – was held in September. This presentation describes the library's prewar history and its functioning as a cultural center within the ghetto. Ellen will then describe how current plans for the building's restoration fit within the broader project of Lithuania's encounter with the Jewish past. As expressions of anti-Semitism proliferate in many European countries, officials, educators, activists, and scholars are seeking to connect this small Baltic land with the Jewish past and with the Holocaust. Once, the ghetto library opened a wider world to trapped ghetto residents. In the future, perhaps, it will once again become a place that opens minds and hearts.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012), which offers a close-up view of how a post-Holocaust nation is encountering its Jewish history. The book won the 2013 Grub Street National Book Prize for Non-Fiction, the 2013 Prakhin International Literary Foundation Award, the 2013 Towson University Prize for Literature, and a Silver Medal in History, 2012 ForeWord Reviews Best Book of the Year Award, and was shortlisted for the 2014 William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Ellen's work has been published in *Polin*, *Shofar*, *Ha'aretz*, *Hadassah*, *The Jewish Forward*, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, and other publications. In 2012, at the AJL conference in Pasadena, Ca., she spoke about her research into Lithuania past and present. For more information: www.ellencassedy.com.

A little more than ten years ago, I embarked on a journey to explore my Jewish family roots in Lithuania. That's my family roots on my mother's side. My father's side is from Germany, England, and Ireland, which is where the name Cassedy comes from.

The journey began as a personal one, having to do with my own family, and with my desire to study Yiddish at the

Vilnius Yiddish Institute. But the exploration quickly expanded, into an exploration of how Lithuania as a nation is engaging with its Jewish family roots, its Jewish heritage and its Holocaust past.

I tell that story, both the personal story and the larger story, in my book, *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*.

Lithuania is a small Baltic nation with a population of only 3 million. But the questions raised in this small, post-Holocaust, post-Soviet country have implications far beyond the borders of Lithuania itself. Questions like these:

How does a country scarred by genocide begin to scrape through the layers of denial to take an honest look at its past and begin to build a more tolerant future?

Is it even possible?

Can we honor our diverse heritages, and remember those who perished, without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past?

What do we gain, and what do we lose, when we seek to overcome mutual suspicions and reach out to “the Other”?

What are the best ways to move that process forward?

In pursuit of these questions, I went looking for the people, Jews and non-Jews, who today are leading Lithuania’s engagement with the Jewish past. And that’s how I happened on the story of the Vilna ghetto library, the story I’m going to tell you today.

The Mefitsei Haskalah Library – which in English means the library of the Society to Spread Enlightenment – was established in 1910. The purpose of the Society, and of the library, was to promote the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment, the *haskalah*, which urged Jews to move away from traditional pious observance and to embrace a more modern and scientific outlook.

The library emerged in a Jewish community that was so rich and vibrant that the city of Vilna, or Vilnius in Lithuanian, was known as the Jerusalem of the North. It was a city that changed hands many times among Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, and it was a multicultural city. Russians, Poles, Belarussians, Lithuanians, and Jews rubbed elbows. No one culture had hegemony. No culture was pressured to conform to the mainstream, because there was no mainstream. This was not a melting pot. And so Jewish culture flowered in Vilna until the city became known, deservedly, as the capital of Yiddishland.

All the Jews of Vilna, some 60,000 strong, a third of the population, spoke Yiddish. As Lucy Dawidowicz wrote: “There were Yiddish newspapers. Shop signs were in Yiddish. Boxing matches had Yiddish-speaking referees. Even the pickpockets and the horse thieves plied their trades in Yiddish.”

For centuries, throughout Lithuania, relations between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors were relatively harmonious – very different from, say Ukraine. Pogroms were rare. But by the late 1930’s, tensions were growing. Nazi sympathies were on the rise.

In 1940, the tanks of the Red Army rolled into Vilnius. In 1941, the German Army invaded. And a multicultural place became a place of ghettos and a place of mass murder.

Tens of thousands of Jews – both longtime residents of the city and the thousands of refugees who had fled when Germany invade Poland – were crammed into an area of several blocks. In the ghetto, bit by bit, something surprising emerged. Rachel Kostanian of the Holocaust Museum in Vilnius, calls it “spiritual resistance.”

There were theatre performances in the Vilna ghetto. And there was the library, which happened to stand inside the area designated for the ghetto. Within days of the sealing of the ghetto, the library was open for business. Thousands of ghetto residents signed up as subscribers.

The librarian was a refugee from Poland named Hermann Kruk, who became the great chronicler of the Vilna Ghetto. His assistant was Dina Abramowicz, who later became a librarian at YIVO

in New York. The head of the reading room was Khaykl Lunski, the former librarian of the Strashun Library founded by a 19th-century rabbi and scholar.

The library contained 45,000 books. Books in Yiddish, books in Hebrew, books in Polish, in Russian, in Lithuanian, German, French, and English. To add to the original holdings, thousands of additional volumes poured in. Some were books that had been plundered from Jewish homes and institutions by the German occupying forces. Others came from the archives of YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research founded in 1925, which relocated to New York in 1940. And some were smuggled in from the nearby Strashun Library.

Rachel Margolis worked in the library alongside Kruk. In her memoir, she recalls the crowds of patrons. “There were sometimes as many as seven hundred readers in a day,” she wrote. “I remember the tremendous line of readers on the stairway, as we scurried from shelf to shelf as quickly as monkeys to get them their books. Tired, hungry people, penned up, sweltering, losing themselves in a book. Even children. I remember how almost every day, ten year old Ilka, small with dark eyes, a tender, pale little face and ears that stuck out, would come running in. He could read a book from start to finish in a single day.” (p 295, *A Partisan of Vilna*)

A report prepared by the library staff in 1943 says this: “Like thirsty lambs, the new ghetto citizens threw themselves upon the books.” Reading was “a narcotic, an intoxicant” for the ghetto prisoners. Yet books were more than a means of escape. The Jews read “to grapple with their condition and find analogies in books on war; on Jewish history; and on resistance.”

Interestingly, although Yiddish was the language of the ghetto, by far the most popular books were in Polish. But the people who ran the library did not object. As they said, the “miracle of the book” was enough.

The building functioned as a vital cultural center of the ghetto. It contained a bookstore, an archive, and a statistical bureau. And in a soundproof room in the basement, members of the ghetto underground practiced shooting weapons they had smuggled in from outside.

And in December of 1942, the ghetto celebrated the circulation of the 100,000th book.

During the two years of the ghetto, the population was reduced again and again by disease, by starvation, and by murderous roundups and deportations. On September 23, 1943, the Vilna ghetto was liquidated. The ghetto residents were deported to camps and killing sites. Some members of the underground escaped to join the anti-Nazi partisans in the nearby forests.

After seven centuries, Jewish life in Lithuania had been decimated. Only a few hundred residents of the Vilna ghetto survived the war. Among the survivors were two writers, Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, who crept into the smoking ruins to search for precious remnants.

The end of the war did not bring peace to Lithuania. The three Baltic nations were incorporated into the Soviet Union, and it was not an easy transition.

For a time, Soviet authorities permitted Sutzkever and others to open a small museum in the library building, where books, prints, photographs, and religious objects were displayed. But by the end of the 1940's, Stalin's "campaign against cosmopolitans," which targeted Jews, was in full swing. The museum was forced to shut its doors.

Some objects from the museum went on display inside a church in the center of town, which was turned into a Soviet "Museum of Atheism." But aside from this mocking display, as the decades passed, most of Lithuania's magnificent Jewish heritage remained invisible, out of sight.

During the Stalinist era, Jews could be arrested and deported to Siberia for the simplest expressions of religious, cultural or Zionist inclination. During the 1970's, when emigration opened up, most Jews living in Lithuania chose to move away. Today, as I said, only 4,000 Jews live in Lithuania, out of a population of 3 million.

As for the library, the books went to the National Library of Lithuania. Today they are stored inside a church. The building was taken over by a music school, and then inhabited by squatters.

In 2009, the Lithuanian government made plans to sell the building, but then Wyman Brent, an American who was then living in Vilnius, learned about the upcoming sale. He sounded the alarm, American Jewish organizations raised a hue and cry, the U.S. Embassy intervened, the sale was called off, and the Jewish Museum in Vilnius took possession of the site.

Now, let's step back for a minute. As we know, the Soviet Union had fallen in 1991, and Lithuania became a new independent nation. By that time, Lithuania had spent half a century living under two regimes. And that had created a cauldron, boiling and bubbling with competing martyrdoms, competing feelings of victimhood, seemingly irreconcilable narratives about the past, stereotypes, resentments, and hatreds.

But within this very difficult environment, some brave people began working to build bridges. To create a new public discourse. To engage deeply with their country's Jewish heritage, even when it's painful. To attempt to build the active civil society that we all want to see in the land once known as the Jerusalem of the North.

To cite just a few of their activities:

In the Tolerance Center, which is part of the Jewish Museum, Jewish artifacts that were saved all through the Soviet years, hidden away in back rooms by Lithuanian curators, were proudly put on display.

At the Choral Synagogue, the one remaining synagogue out of a former 100, services began to be held.

Faina Kukliansky, the chair of the Vilnius Jewish Community today, started a project called Bagel Shop that aims to attract Lithuanians to learn about Jewish culture and to embrace the nearly vanished Jewish heritage that was once interwoven into the fabric of Lithuanian life. So once again, bagels are now being served in Vilna.

In September, YIVO announced a new partnership with the Central State Archives of Lithuania and the National Library of Lithuania, to create a web portal that will make YIVO's prewar archives available online -- 1.5 million documents. According to YIVO, it will be "the single largest digital collection related to East European Jewish civilization, including the largest collection of Yiddish language materials in the world."

And finally, among the leaders of the effort to honor Jewish heritage in Vilnius is a group of young Lithuanians calling themselves Vardai, which means "names." Audra Cepkauskaite is a leader of Vardai.

Every year, in cities across the country, on the anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto, they hold a solemn ceremony where they read out the names of the ghetto residents. The ceremony goes on for hours. One by one, Lithuanians step up to take a turn reading from the list.

This year, the Vardai group trained its sights on the ghetto library. The first thing they did was to hang up enlargements of family photos that had been found in the ruins of the ghetto. As soon as the posters went up, graffiti artists began "tagging" them with their signatures. But Audra notes that the tags appear only in the margins of the posters. They don't deface the posters. "They tag respectfully," she said. "We're having a conversation." She's a very tolerant person.

The next thing the group did was to organize a cleanup of the library. I was in Vilnius last summer, speaking and studying at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute. And one hot Monday in August, I was invited to go over to the library building and see what they were doing. I made my way into this dark, derelict place, where the Vardai members were wearing masks and pushing brooms, carrying out trash and broken furniture.

The members of Vardai have big dreams for the future of the building. If funds can be found for restoration, they hope the former library will become a place where cultural events can be held honoring the lost Jewish world. They hope the building will play an important role in the ongoing effort to connect Lithuanians with the Jewish past and with the Holocaust -- a place that will help to determine whether Lithuania is destined to be a place where voices of hatred grow louder, or a place where people take Holocaust remembrance seriously and dedicate themselves to ensuring that such a tragedy cannot happen again.

Lithuania's efforts to engage with the Jewish past are fragile. Jewish cemeteries and communal buildings are periodically desecrated, and prejudice explodes on Internet sites.

Just as many European countries are experiencing an increase in expressions of anti-Semitism, Lithuania, too, has its share of intolerance. Neo-Nazis parade down city streets on independence day. And while the Lithuanian government recently allocated \$50 million in restitution funds to the Jewish community, the government is also regularly criticized for insensitive actions and inactions.

It's hard to say whether, on balance, Lithuania is moving forward or backward when it comes to honestly confronting the Jewish past. Maybe it's both.

I saw graffiti in Vilnius that speaks to this duality. “Up with a white Lithuania.” That’s been crossed out, and in its place someone has written “Up with a world without racism.”

In September, the first event took place inside the newly cleaned ghetto library building. In memory of the anniversary of the liquidation in 1943, members of the public were invited to attend a reading of poetry by Avrom Sutzkever, the ghetto survivor who went on to become the world’s greatest postwar Yiddish poet.

The highlight of the program was Sutzkever’s “Green Aquarium,” a series of prose poems that was recently published in a Lithuanian translation by Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, the director of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute. Kvietkauskas learned Yiddish at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute. He was part of the cleanup crew in August. For the September event, he invited a group of survivors and tolerance leaders up to read the poems aloud.

In the poems, Sutzkever peers into the past as if through glass, offering glimpses of the ghetto in its last throes. Here’s a passage translated into English by Zackary Sholem Berger:

“I look in: people are swimming here like fish.
Numberless phosphorescent faces....
they are all swimming in the green aquarium,
in a kind of silky, airy music.”

During the ghetto years, the library opened up a wider world to trapped ghetto residents through the power of the printed word. Yitzhak Rudashevski, a teenage resident of the ghetto, was a devoted patron of the library. His diary was discovered in the ruins of the ghetto after the war. He wrote: “Reading books in the ghetto is the biggest treat there is. Books link us to freedom. Books connect us to the world.”

In the future, perhaps this old library building will once again become a place that opens minds and hearts.

Ellen Cashedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012). Visit her website at www.ellencashedy.com.