

The Mitzvah Project: The Collaborative Initiative of the AJL Librarians to  
Help the Vilnius Jewish Public Library with Collection Developing  
*Lynn Waghalter and Olga Potap*

**Description:** *The Mitzvah* project commenced during the summer of 2015 at the initiative of Ms. Lynn Waghalter, a librarian from Beldon Library, San Antonio, TX. After attending a session concerning the efforts of rebuilding the Vilnius Jewish Public Library at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual AJL Conference in Silver Spring, MD in June 2015, Lynn decided to help them with their goal. The *Mitzvah* project came into being. Another AJL member, Olga Potap, a librarian from Boston University, contacted Žilvinas Beliauskas, Head of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library inviting him to start this collaborative project. This paper addresses the issue of how the private collaborative initiative can be transformed to a full-scale international project. We hope that the *Mitzvah* project will attract interest from other AJL members.

**Olga Potap** is a librarian at the School of Theology Library at Boston University. She holds a master's degree from Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science and a master's in liberal arts from Boston University. While pursuing her master's degree at Boston University, she did her course work in Jewish studies with Professors Elie Wiesel and Hillel Levine. She is a member of the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS). Her research focuses on the role of civil societies and benevolent organizations in the communal solidarity and orientation of European Jewish communities at different points in their development.

**Lynn Waghalter** is the Librarian at the Beldon Library, Jewish Federation of San Antonio, TX. Lynn has a BS in education from the University of Houston and an MA in early childhood and elementary education from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Prior to becoming a librarian, she was an elementary school teacher.

**Description:** *The Mitzvah* Project commenced during the summer 2015 at the initiative of Lynn Waghalter, a librarian at Beldon Library, San Antonio, TX and Olga Potap, a librarian at School of Theology Library at Boston University, Boston, MA. The main purpose of the project was to help the Vilnius Jewish Public Library with collection development. More specifically, *the Mitzvah* project has four tasks:

- To collect books and media that meet the needs of the Vilnius Jewish Public library's versatile community;

- To build a core children's book collection. The children's section did not exist at the library prior to 2015;
- To raise funds to cover shipping expenses;
- To publicize the mission and the work of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library and to encourage more donors to lend their support to *The Mitzvah Project*.

**Background Information:** 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, with the dedication and efforts of many Lithuanian and international supporters. The library was established as a cultural institution for Jews and non-Jews that would adopt and promote compassion, respect and responsibility for all members of the community. In 2016 at the 51<sup>st</sup> AJL Conference, Mr. Žilvinas Beliauskas, Head of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library, announced that the long-term goal for the library was to become a large European Jewish public library. This goal is difficult to accomplish without collaboration with other libraries and cultural and/or educational institutions, especially given the fact that the Vilnius Jewish Library collection development is supported only through public donations.

- Scope of the presentation:** The presentation is divided into three parts:
- We will relate our personal experience of collecting books and fundraising;
  - We will highlight the challenges we have encountered;

- We will propose ideas for how the private collaborative initiative can be transformed to a full-scale international project.

### **Lynn Waghalter's Activities toward *The Mitzvah Project***

After hearing the presentation by Olga Potap about the efforts to re-establish a Jewish Public Library in Vilna at the AJL Conference in Silver Spring, MD in 2015, I decided that I wanted to get involved. At the 2015 presentation, I saw pictures of what the Jewish Library in Vilna was like before the destruction by the Nazis. Books were plundered and destroyed as well as the beautiful library, the cradle of Jewish thought and education. I saw pictures of how the ruins of this library were being brought back to life. I decided that I would help by collecting and sending books.

The Beldon Library is a part of the Jewish Federation of San Antonio, Texas. This would be my library's *Mitzvah Project*. I brought my enthusiasm home and reported my plan to the Federation staff. My supervisor at that time approved. We needed to raise funds to support sending books to Vilnius. I wrote about this project in our local Jewish newspaper, *The Jewish Journal of San Antonio*, monthly publication of the Jewish Federation of San Antonio. I had many duplicate Jewish books in my library that I had weeded out. Book donations also included items from the Judaic Collection of the University of Texas at Tyler. This collection was taken out of circulation. My husband heard about the books and contacted Chief Librarian, Jeanne Standley. My husband and I made two 325 mile one-way trips to collect all the books! Other donated books came from Beldon patrons. I contacted Žilvinas Beliauskas by email to find out if those books could be used in their library. The

problem has been shipping to Lithuania. It is quite expensive. Elaine Mederos, a member of our San Antonio Jewish Community was moved by the project and has donated \$1,000 towards shipping costs and plans to give more. Her mother's family was from Vilna. Elaine's great-grandfather was a rabbi/teacher in Vilna.

I have sent several cartons of books and have many more to send. We are looking at ways to cut the shipping costs to be able to continue this humanitarian project.

The money we have raised is ear-marked for the Mitzvah Project. It cannot be used for any other purpose.

The highlight of the 2016 AJL Conference in Charleston, SC for me was meeting Žilvinas in person!

I feel honored to have helped in this small way to bring the Vilna/Vilnius Jewish Public Library back to life. Our books from Texas, 5751 miles away will have a new life as well.

### **Olga Potap's Activities toward *The Mitzvah Project***

Since August 2015, I have received 105 books donated to the Vilnius Jewish Public Library by several donors. At the project's launch, the majority of donors were a close circle of family and friends. Later, I started receiving donations from people outside of my circle. The news about the Vilnius Library is spreading widely among people. I am using every opportunity to make the Vilnius Jewish Public Library known in order to recruit more donors and create a stable circle of the library's friends. For example, last summer the School of Theology (hereafter, STH)

at Boston University held a series of lunch talks for STH community, one of which I participated in with a talk about the Vilnius Jewish Library. Shortly after my presentation, I received a collection of 25 books donated by the STH community. Another donor who sent 15 books to the Vilnius Jewish Library is Miriam Nickerson, former Director of Development at Georgetown University Library in Washington, DC. Her family was originally from Vilnius. Miriam knew about the Vilnius Jewish Public Library from my friend and colleague, who also works at the library at Georgetown University.

Dr. and Mrs. Sundel from Brookline, MA donated a collection of children's books. Parts of the donated books have already been sent to the Vilnius Jewish Library, the rest of the collection will be shipped in the next few months. Every set of books, which I sent to Vilnius, was approved by Žilvinas Beliauskas, the director of the Vilnius Jewish Library, in order to receive only books that match the library's collection development policy.

In working with donors, especially with authors who donate their own books to the library, I always ask them to autograph their books and/or to write a personal letter to the Vilnius Jewish Public Library. If books are donated from an estate, I make a bookplate in honor of the memory of the deceased. When possible, the text of bookplate would be translated into Lithuanian. Grigori Nekritch, a medical doctor from France donated three books from the estate of his friend. The bookplate was created in honor of his friend with a beautiful inscription in Lithuanian. Another gift was received from Professor Hillel Levine of Boston University, who donated three books that he authored. One of his books, *In Search*

*of Sugihara*, is the biography of Japanese diplomat Chuine Sugihara, who served in Lithuania and helped approximately 10,000 Jews escape the country by issuing the transit visas.

Professor Levine wrote a moving letter addressed to Žilvinas Beliauskas and the library community, saying:

*The murder of Jews was also accompanied by the destruction of the extraordinary Jewish culture, particularly its literature that flourished on Lithuanian soil. A post-World War II generation of Lithuanians has little opportunity to engage that past and to reconcile themselves with the very few descendants of the murdered Jews who continue to live in Lithuania. Who could imagine that a man like you would suddenly appear and direct the institution that you have managed? From where did you receive the audacious imagination, how did you find the energy, how did you gather the resources to create this great institution, imaging the Library through the Kabbalistic phrase, "being--- of massive greatness and beauty ---out of nothingness," out of the ashes of a civilization that is irretrievable.*

*We will follow your institution, as it will get built by you and the people who, with enthusiasm and wonder, you inspire. We hope that it will be at the core of the efforts of young Lithuanians to remember their lost past, to reconcile themselves with Jews who live amidst them, and beyond, and to seek the creativity and civility that can inspirationally mold future generations.*

I strive to ensure that the library receives not faceless boxes of books, but rather books that have their own destiny and a participation in the life of the Vilnius community --*"Habent sua fata libelli."*

### **Shipment**

The books were delivered to the Vilnius Public Library three ways:

- USPS Airmail M-Bag - airmail M-bags are direct sacks of printed matter sent to a single foreign addressee at a single address. Prices are based on the weight of the sack. Average price for 10 LB box is \$ 66.00
- Via Lithuanian Embassy, Washington, D.C. cargo. Thanks to help of the former cultural attaché at Lithuanian embassy in US, Mr. Evaldas

Stankevicius, we sent several cartons of books via UPS paying the domestic shipping cost only, which was approximately \$ 8 per 10 lb. box.

- Personal delivery - I used every occasion while traveling to Lithuania to bring gifts to the Vilnius Jewish Public library as well encouraging people who travel to Vilnius to bring books or media for the library. The latest of my personal delivery was an autographed book by Ellie Wiesel and two CDs of the music of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. Hopefully, these two CDs are the beginning of a new library collection of media of famous American and Canadian musicians with Lithuanian origin.

### **Fundraising**

In 2017, I started a fundraising campaign through [www.gofundme.com](http://www.gofundme.com). GoFundMe is a crowd-funding platform that allows users to launch their own campaign to raise money for various projects. The fundraisers can share their project with other people through social media. Donors make a donation through WePay, the online payment service provider by credit or debit cards. GofundMe collects 5 % fee from each donation. WePay collects 2.9 % and \$ 0.30 from each transaction. I posted my fundraising project under *The Mitzvah* Project title with a descriptive subtitle Donation for the Vilnius Jewish Public Library. The announced fundraising goal was to collect funds to cover shipping expenses of books and media materials donated to the Vilnius Jewish Public Library. I set a goal to collect \$ 380. In a few days from starting the project, I received \$ 478. I used this money to send books to Vilnius. Every time books were sent to Vilnius, I posted an update

on GoFundMe website, which automatically sent updates to the social media networks to keep my donors informed about status of the project and amount of money I spent. From his side, Žilvinas Beliauskas, the director of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library posts updates and information about books the library received at the Vilnius Jewish Public library website and Facebook.

### **Summary**

After less than two years since the *Mitzvah* project launched, Lynn Waghalter and Olga Potap collected 450 books from many donors on different topics of Jewish studies, including children's books. One hundred books were sent to the Vilnius Jewish Public Library. The rest of the books will be sent in the next few months. Our fundraising campaigns brought us \$ 1,478. The money was spent to cover domestic and international shipping expenses. As of June 1, 2017 we spent \$ 664.

### **Challenges**

At the beginning of our project we were faced with unforeseen difficulties related to Lithuanian customs procedures. The first parcel was imposed with customs duty of 50 Euro, despite the fact that the customs declaration clearly indicated that the books were humanitarian aid. Žilvinas Beliauskas had to fight to waive the payment. He contacted to the Lithuanian authorities including the customs director and the Vice-minister of Foreign affairs. Žilvinas sent me a copy

of his letter to the Lithuanian Custom office. He wrote: “ I’ve been stressing in my letters that it is a humanitarian gift to the Lithuanian State and people as well as guests of Lithuania to use the books free of charge for everyone including customs officers.”

Other challenges, as we discovered, was the lack of communications between other libraries involved in the similar projects of collecting and sending books to the Vilnius Jewish Public Library. During my last visit at the Vilnius Jewish library in October 2016, I noticed a box with shipping label from the Library of Temple Israel in Boston. Collaborative efforts with this library in Boston and other donors from USA would strengthen *The Mitzvah* project.

### **Proposals**

One of the goals of this presentation is to propose recommendations that would help to transfer our private initiative to the full-scale international project. To make it happen, we are seeking the support from all members of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

The proposals are the following:

1. To clarify mission, vision, and values of *The Mitzvah* project for its future development and strategic planning;
2. To organize a coordinating committee to manage the project;
3. To promote the *The Mitzvah* project through ha-Safran network;
4. To recruit volunteers among the members of the AJL to help with collecting and selecting books for the Vilnius Jewish Public Library;

5. To allocate a separate restricted account at AJL or other non-profit institutions for fundraising campaign to support *The Mitzvah* project.

We hope that our collective effort and collaboration will help the Vilnius Jewish public library achieve its goal to become a large and vital European Jewish library.