

# Yiddish saves lives - in Vilnius!

Vilnius is home to the first Yiddish institute set up in eastern Europe since the Holocaust.

By Adam B. Ellick

It is hard to imagine that Yiddish is being spoken - taught, even - on the streets of a city once so Jewish as was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." But where Jews once walked and talked, their language is now being revived by a local population eager to learn their past.

Although Meir Shub in Israeli, launched the Vilnius Yiddish Institute only three months ago, the journey dates back to 1991.

At that time, most of Lithuania's three million citizens took to the streets, courageously confronting armed Soviet tanks that had railed their homeland for the previous 46 years. This historic clash gave birth to the eventual collapse of communism and ultimately something that may facilitate Lithuania's "known since 1990" independence. A suddenly liberated Lithuania proved fertile ground for a revival of its long-suppressed religious cultures, including Yiddish.

Meanwhile, thousands of kilometers away in Israel, a Hebrew University student - initially motivated by the eastern European revolution, Belgian-born Cahan was engaged in a mini-revolution of his own: the 28-year-old had just abandoned his three-year affinity for romantic literature in favor of his native Yiddish.

Cahan started to study Yiddish literature, and translated French and English well-known authors into Yiddish. He translated the entire French and English canon, but he found that he could not read Yiddish. He decided to do something about it.

These two seemingly unrelated worlds finally converged in 1996 when Cahan first stepped foot in Lithuania and started a Yiddish summer program - something



'I am an old, old Jew. There were great great Litvaks, the greatest Jews. And today there are lots of Lithuanian students studying Jewish history and I'm very pleased.' - Yiddish teacher Meir Shub

Lithuanians would not dare dream of during the former regime. Three years later, in August 2001, he cofounded the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in the Lithuanian capital.

It is the first academic Yiddish institute in eastern Europe since the Holocaust.

Headed up and affiliated with the historic Vilnius University, it is the oldest in the former Soviet Union - and the institute enrolled 30 eastern European students that fall in its

credit courses, which include Elementary and Advanced Yiddish, Modern Yiddish Literature, Yiddish Folklore and a handful of liberal arts classes covering Eastern European Jewish history, art and the Holocaust.

The institute dominated the Vilnius Summer Program, a formerly independent one-month intensive Yiddish summer school that's been functioning since 1993 -

and the very program that wowed Cahan to the lowlands. He expects the summer school to receive some much needed funding now that it falls under the nation's umbrella.

This past summer, 68 students - ages 16 to 26 - from countries including Israel, the United States and Mexico, participated in the program, which splits its agenda between classroom and culture. Students often journey to Lithuania's north to meet old Jews who still carry the authentic vocabulary. In the afternoon they receive a wide offering of Yiddish culture including theater, music, films, workshops and walking tours.

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- David Katz, program director and cofounder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute

## LIKE STARTING AN OLD CAR

Emanuel Zingers, the frisky leader of Lithuania's Jewish revival, says resurrecting Yiddish theater in his native Vilnius, for the first time since the Holocaust, was like trying to get his grandmothers' Chrysler atop 60 years stored in the garage.

"To get inside the car, first you don't know if you're able to drive," says Zingers, 41. "But then the people older than 75 started to applaud and breathe together with the actors. They recognized the same images, sounds and melodies from before. It was like a holy Yiddish movie. The present car started to run."

That was the scene on the eve of Hanukkah, when Israel's National Yiddish Theater, YiddishTeater, resurrected Vilnius's Theatrical Center, a prewar Yiddish theater that now doubles as a Jewish museum.

As a child, Zingers followed six decades of Nazi and Soviet rule, the four-story building was left in ruin. Reconstruction began in 1998 when Zingers, a well-connected former Lithuanian MP who spent the early 1990s resurrecting Yiddish culture for the Council of Europe, raised "hundreds of thousands of dollars" from private and public sources in the West, mainly via the French and German governments.

The result: a once-professal shell transformed into a glorious pre-Holocaust theater with authentic Yiddish posters. If Zingers can extract more funds, he plans to locate art exhibits and erect a library in the still-ruined space.

It was a long and tragic wait for more than 200, mostly elderly, Litvaks who attended the opening night performance and wept at the words very songs that marked their youth.

"Temporarily, this house started in breathe again," said Zingers, the museum's director. "It was an authentic Vilnius-type performance. It was my world, it was the life of my people, my killed people."

As a child, Hava Shpinger, 80, used to frequent the theater every month for marionette shows with her classmates. The Jewish revival prompted her memories of the original.

"We always sat at the balcony. It looked the same, except maybe a little more simple. And it was always full." For her friend, Fanya Benavise, 79, who volunteered at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, the opening act, "Good Yiddish Yiddish," concluded years of her yearning for the return of Yiddish culture.

"I used to walk by this theater every day for six years as a girl," she says, all smiles. "Tonight it was important to hear it again."

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Finally, Cahan plans to erect monuments and plaques throughout Vilnius that would celebrate the city's deep Yiddish history.

Before the Second World War, Vilnius - the city's Yiddish name - was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" and the center of world Yiddish culture. More than half of Vilnius's pre-war population of 240,000 was Jewish. The city featured some 100 synagogues and six daily Jewish newspapers. It was chosen over Warsaw to house the first Yiddish academic institute in Lithuania.

Today, most of the city's Yiddish theater, libraries and schools, nearly all of which once crumbled down when 94 percent of the country's Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Today the remains are haunting more than the synagogue, a rebuilt Jewish day school, a reformed Yiddish theater and the gutted Zohar or Jewish Stern which ran through the Old Town and bears virtually no resemblance to its old-world charm.

Cahan refuses to get tangled in discussing the terror that struck Vilnius during the Holocaust and the expulsions of 1941. "There is much about the Holocaust that's being done by many, but we want to stress the vibrant Yiddish culture that lived through the Holocaust," says the deeply devout Cahan. "The Holocaust is my tragedy but this is our tragedy."

That treasure is 1,000 years of Yiddish culture that nurtured scores of renowned poets, novelists, artists and philosophers, including Vilnius's 18th-century rabbinical scholar known as the Vilna Gaon, who shaped the entire "Talmud from memory at the age of six.

Despite its cultural activities, the role of the institute remains in linguistic offerings. A combination of German, Hebrew and various Slavic languages, Yiddish was spoken by some 90 percent of world Jews before World War II. Today, fewer than one million people speak the language.

In Israel, Yiddish has been replaced as a spoken language by acculturated Jews since the 1950s. What's more, English prevailed over Yiddish for most Eastern European immigrants who arrived in the United States in the early 20th century.

After the Holocaust, it seemed odd natural that people should want to preserve their culture," says Katz. But in Western Jewish culture, after the war, there was a fear that children might not have perfect English accents. "Yiddish was destroyed in its native territory. My goal has been to train masters, in small numbers, to create little islands of survival where people write and publish in Yiddish. The dream is for modest but serious survival. We cannot reverse history, but we can make a dent in it."

Simon Gershtevich may be Katz's exception. For Gershtevich, 21, Yiddish was the first step in his mission to preserve his beloved native language. The lone Jewish student in Elementary Yiddish Gershtevich came from a Lithuanian Jewish family that's been speaking Yiddish at home for the past 300 years.

Despite this rooted history, he was never taught to read or write in Yiddish. Upon

completing the class, he'll begin teaching Yiddish at the Jewish day school in Vilnius. "As long as there is one Yiddish teacher, it will be alive," he says confidently.

But Gershtevich is in the charge. Literally all other students in the summer-long Yiddish courses are non-Jews. Cahan doesn't ask for a non-Jewish Lithuanian to teach Yiddish, but he says, "It's not worth waiting for translations, we've gotten to have Yiddish."

Take Regina Spector, 28, a doctoral student in Lithuanian literature who first encountered Yiddish last year, who says she's grateful for the Yiddish Institute. She says she thought she was a "Yiddish teacher" when she was 10. "I'm not worth waiting for translations, we've gotten to have Yiddish."

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- Mendy Cahan, cofounder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute

to summer childhood memories of Yiddish for at least 1,000 years. At first they were self-funded, but currently Katz's mission is backed by the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

The start-up process is nothing new to

Cahan, who acts as director, and Katz, the institute's director - of academic research. Cahan founded Vilnius Yiddish, a grassroots Yiddish culture center in Jerusalem, in 1992. Katz, meanwhile, launched the Yiddish program at Oxford

University in 1978 and taught there for 18 years. A line-year ago he founded the Center for Stateless Cultures at Vilnius University.

The non-profit institute was established thanks to 500,000 in private donations. But to carry out all its plans, Cahan says the school will require 2,500,000 annually. It aspires to publish and republish Yiddish literature and an atlas of pre-war Yiddish geography in Eastern Europe. Plus the institute hopes to host conferences and fund many of Katz's future expeditions - he'd gladly record the personal encounters - which cost about \$5,000 for two-week journeys.



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'Jewish history is an important link in the chain of Lithuanian history. Without understanding Jewish history I can't learn about Lithuania and all of European and world history.'

- history student Justinas Aklavicius

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