Yiddish yet lives – in Vilna!

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 it was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania." But where Jews once walked and talked their native language, it is now being revived by a local population eager to learn their past.

Although Mendy Cahan, an 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 ruled their homeland for the previous 46 years. This historic clash gave birth to the eventual collapse of communism, and ultimately something this tiny Baltic nation hadn't known since 1939: 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 lived a Hebrew University student totally unfazed by the eastern European revolution. Belgian-born Cahan was engrossed 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.

"I started to study Yiddish literature, and I realized French and English will manage without me, but Yiddish, well, that is mine. It is not church and state but it is tallit and shtetl. I needed to do something in Yiddish." And he did.

These two seemingly unrelated worlds finally converged in 1998 when Cahan first stepped foot in Lithuania to teach a startup Yiddish summer program – something Lithuanians would not dare to 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.

PHOTOS: ADAM B. ELLICK

'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

Housed in and affiliated with the historic Vilnius University – the oldest in the former Soviet Union – the institute enrolled 30 eastern European students this 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 1998 – and the very program that wooed Cahan to the lowlands. He expects the summer school to receive some much needed funding now that it falls under the institute's umbrella.

This past summer, 68 students – ages 16 to 86 – from 16 countries, including Israel, the United States and Mexico, participated in the program, which splits its agenda between classroom and culture. Students often journey to Lithuanian shtetls to meet old Jews who still carry the authentic vernacular. In the afternoon they receive a wide offering of Yiddish culture including theater, music, films, workshops and walking tours.

'There is much about the Holocaust that's being done by many, but we want to stress the living civilization that was in all this areaThe Holocaust is our tragedy but this is our treasure.'
– Mendy Cahan, cofounder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute

In five months Cahan transformed an abandoned printing factory into a remodeled two-level center in the restored five-century-old campus. In addition to its classes, it boasts a growing 2,000-book library and cultural activities aplenty.

Curious minds can refer to the digital archives of the institute's other cofounder, Dovid Katz, 45, a Brooklyn-born Yiddish doyen who spent much of the last decade traversing through Eastern European villages searching for the few remaining Yiddish-speaking Jews, or as he says, "the last of the Mohicans."

He muses that during the dozens of expeditions he has made, he has managed to summon childhood memories of Yiddish for at least 1,000 Jews. At first they were self-financed, but currently Katz's missions are backed by the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

The start-up process is nothing new to both Cahan, who acts as director, and Katz, the institute's director of academic research. Cahan founded Yung 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 few years ago he founded the Center for Stateless Cultures at Vilnius University.

The non-profit institute was established thanks to $60,000 in private donations. But to carry out all its plans, Cahan says the school will require $250,000 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 digitally records the precious encounters – which cost about $5,000 for two-week journeys.

'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.'
– Dovid Katz, program director and cofounder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute

"Now that there's an institute and not just a Don Quixote, my hope is there will be an organized infrastructure with more students going out on the road," says Katz.

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

Before the Second World War, Vilna – the city's Yiddish name – was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" and the capital of world Yiddish culture. More than half of Vilnius's prewar 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 – YIVO, now headquartered in New York.

It also had Yiddish theaters, libraries and schools, nearly all of which came crashing down when 94 percent of the country's Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Today the remains are nothing more than one synagogue, a rebuilt Jewish day school, a remodeled Yiddish theater and the gentrified Zydu or Jewish Street which runs through the Old Town and bears virtually no resemblance to its old world charm.

But Cahan refuses to get tangled in discussing the terror that struck Vilnius during the German occupation from 1941 to 1945.

"There is much about the Holocaust that's being done by many, but we want to stress the living civilization that was in all this area," says the dapperly dressed Cahan. "The Holocaust is our tragedy but this is our treasure."

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

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

In Israel, Yiddish has been rejected as a spoken language by secular 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 only 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. American Jews had other things on their minds, like commercial success."

Today, Yiddish's lifeline in secular American Jewish communities consists of little more than a mumble of nostalgic words like *meshugana*, the Yiddish word for crazy. But in traditional Hassidic communities, Yiddish is growing at a rapid rate. While there has indeed been a resurgence of interest in Yiddish around the world – primarily in Yiddish music, theater and humor – there are only a handful of serious Yiddish studies programs at the university level.

Cahan and Katz plead not to be labeled as quixotic radicals who are trying to revive a dying language. Instead they hope the institute will nourish future Yiddish scholars.

"Yiddish was destroyed in its native territory," says Katz. "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."

Student Simon Gurevichius may be Katz's exemplar. For Gurevichius, 21, Yiddish class is the first step in his mission to preserve his beloved native language. The lone Jewish student in Elementary Yiddish, Gurevichius comes 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.

"So long as there is one Yiddish teacher, it will be alive," he says confidently.

But Gurevichius is the exception. Virtually all other students in the semester-long Yiddish courses are non-Jews. Cahan doesn't ask what inspires a non-Jewish Lithuanian to toil in a language whose practical benefits are quite scarce. And while some students concede that their enrollment is nothing more than fulfilling academic requirements, intellectual curiosity and professional interest appear to be the main forces of attraction.

Take Brigita Speicyte, 28, a doctoral student in Lithuanian literature who first encountered Yiddish last year when attending a lecture by Katz about 19th-century Yiddish poetry. Sensing parallels between Yiddish and Lithuanian literature, Speicyte sought to take up Yiddish literature, but promptly hit a massive stumbling block: there were few translated works.

"It is not worth waiting for translations, so it's better to start to learn Yiddish," she says. "In studying Lithuanian literature, I began to feel a cultural void, and you can't grasp all the things that are happening in Vilnius. At some point you have to start to learn something about Jews in Lithuania, and in our language you cannot get a lot of information or knowledge."

In fact, the very word Yiddish is so obscure to most Lithuanians that when Speicyte told a friend what she is studying, her friend mistakenly thought Speicyte meant the Bible.

"There's a difference between Yiddish and Hebrew," she says smiling. "That's the first thing you have to separate for them."

Justinas Akstinas, 21, is a history student enrolled in the institute's Lithuanian Jewish History class.

"Jewish history is an important link in the chain of Lithuanian history," he says. "Without understanding Jewish history I can't learn about Lithuania and all of European and world history. So it's very important. We killed 94 percent of Lithuanian Jews and some people in [the West] say we are a very anti-Semitic nation and of course we can prove that we are not."

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A scene from an Israeli Yiddishpiel recently performed in Vilnius.

Rasa Zakeviciute, 20, is writing her thesis on Jewish integration into modern Lithuania – a rare and exotic topic in this nation. The event, says the sociology and philosophy major, serves as her main research hub.

"It's not an open community here in Lithuania," she says. "If you want information you have to know people. Today, there is not enough information about Jewish people in Lithuania. I think if Lithuanians knew more about the community they would have better opinions of Jewish people."

Students, however, are not the institute's only beneficiaries. Many poor elderly Jews are brought to the classroom from the countryside to speak openly about the very culture they fearfully suppressed for the last five decades.

"We cannot bring the old ladies to Oxford or America," says Cahan. "But for these villagers this is an opportunity of their life to study and celebrate Yiddish culture. It is some kind of lifeline for their ethnic identity. We can learn very much from them."

Meir Shub is a 78-year-old Litvak, or Lithuanian Jew, who spent his entire life in Vilnius. Shub is nearly deaf, but he won't allow his disability to deter him from teaching at the institute. When his students have a question they scream into his ear.

"I am a Litvak," shouts the charismatic white-haired man, proudly waving his arms. "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."

Cahan's improbable journey from Western Europe to Israel and eventually to Vilnius is a lesson in perseverance and passion.

His ancestors came to Belgium from the Transylvania region of Romania. Raised in Antwerp's cohesive Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking community, Cahan moved to Israel in 1980 at 18 to study at a yeshiva.

After nearly a decade of Talmud and romantic literature, Cahan re-immersed himself in Yiddish. He was disturbed by a lack of mainstream Yiddish culture in the Jewish homeland. While Russian, Polish and French bookshops dotted the land, Cahan found next to nothing in his native language. Yiddish radio stations and newspapers, he says, were tough to find.

Then he learned a famous Yiddish phrase: "Where there is no man, a herring is also a fish."

"So I started to collect Yiddish books that shouldn't get lost," he says. "I didn't know what I was getting into, but it became a passion that served many purposes. I traveled through Israel, rented cars, and met people who donated books. And I heard their stories."

Word spread quickly, and within two years Cahan's Jerusalem apartment was crammed with some 6,000 books – courtesy of friends, writers, journalists and relatives of the deceased – and he was forced to find a larger home to accommodate his new friends.

Driven by idealism but plagued by penury, Cahan entered "the oppressive world" of soliciting funding for a proper Yiddish library. A few existing Yiddish institutions were uninterested in the student's proposals. When he visited the World Yiddish Council – willing to fund over his substantial collection – the director asked Cahan to fix a broken fax machine before sending him out the door. He also encountered rejection at the Beit Sholem Aleichem book center in Israel, where he offered his library and sought to help run the center for a year.

His first endorsement came from Aaron Lansky, founder of the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Cahan founded the Israeli office and managed it for 18 months until Lansky vowed to close it down, deeming the project too demanding in a land with a language barrier and hidden bitter attitudes towards Yiddish. Lansky then suggested that Cahan donate his book collection to the center's American office. But Cahan refused.

"These are books in Israel," he says. "They arrived in Israel from a long, long way and they belong to the people who came here. Yiddish culture must stay in Israel. So I found a storage place in an industrial area of Jerusalem and I rented it. My architect friend made a library plan with movable shelves. I bought a table and a carpet and a shelf and it grew up to be an avant-garde Yiddish cultural center."

Today, Yung Yiddish houses 36,000 books in its 100 square meters. The grassroots cultural center, in Romema, offers cabaret concerts – Cahan sings in a Yiddish band – and guest lectures for its 700 members.

"It's not something that needs to close at 9 p.m. because the cleaning woman is coming. I can spend nights working on books and we sing and drink and study."

This year, Yung Yiddish received its first-ever dose of institutional financial support when the Lerner Foundation granted it $5,000. Still, Yung Yiddish stands at a crossroads, and appears to be a victim of its own success. The center has reached its book capacity – it's literally full from floor to ceiling. It desperately needs a full-time librarian, and Cahan can only ask so much of his volunteering colleagues. He is deliberating whether to invest the time and energy – that could mean revisiting the oppressive world of requesting funds – or let Yung Yiddish remain a crippled beauty.

The path to Vilnius was paved in 1998 when Cahan received a phone call from Katz, a man he had never met but whose endeavors he had known about. Katz was plotting his newest creation, a month-long Vilnius Yiddish Program, and offered Cahan a teaching position. The next year Cahan returned as the director, and the two friends began planning for a Yiddish institute in Vilnius.

The two started outlining the institute in late 1999. Today Cahan and Katz, the son of Lithuanian Yiddish poet Menke Katz, run the show. Katz was recently awarded a Guggenheim Writing Fellowship for Yiddish fiction, the first Guggenheim ever given for a Yiddish book. The book, he says, is set in 19th-century Lithuania – and Kabbala plays a large role.

It will be his fourth volume of Yiddish fiction. Meanwhile, Cahan assumes the daily grind of the institute.

"Again, I'm working with no backing and with the need to be very creative," says Cahan. "We are not doing it in the sense of 'let's look for money and wait a few years.' Instead it's standing already. Books are here, classes are done. The thing is working before we even found the battery."

Cahan learned from his failures in Israel, and says the institute wouldn't exist if he wasn't an expert in starting from scratch. The task of accomplishing such a project was enormous, especially in Eastern Europe where bureaucracy still runs strong. In order to receive affiliation with Vilnius University, Cahan dedicated endless hours creating a program suitable to Western academic accreditation standards. And of course networking played a big role, which in his vodka-loving land means filling one's stomach with bread before important meetings.

"This is really a surprise. I, the son of a Hassidic family, with my Transylvanian Yiddish, having established a monocultural center in Israel, and now [also] in the hearts of the Litvaks, dealing with the Russian mentality. It's funny. It's very nice. I'm glad about it." ■

LIKE STARTING AN OLD CAR

Emanuelis Zingeris, the feisty leader of Lithuania's Jewish cultural revival, says resurrecting Yiddish theater in his native Vilnius, for the first time since the Holocaust, was like trying to restart his grandmother's Chrysler after 60 years stored in the garage.

"You get inside the car, [but] you don't know if you'll be able to move," says Zingeris, 41. "But then the people older than 75 started to applaud and breathe together with the actors. They recognized the same images and sounds and melodies from before. It was like a holy Jewish mass. The prewar car started to go."

That was the scene on the eve of Hanukka, when Israel's National Yiddish Theater, Yiddishpiel, reinaugurated Vilnius's Tolerance Center, a prewar Yiddish theater that now doubles as a Jewish museum.

In 1989, following six decades of Nazi and Soviet rule, the four-story building was left in ruins. Reconstruction began in 1998 when Zingeris, a well-connected former Lithuanian MP who spent the early 1990s researching Yiddish culture for the Council of Europe, raised "hundreds of thousands of dollars" from private and public sectors in the West, mainly via the French and German governments.

The result: a once-roofless shell transformed into a glorious pre-modern treasure dotted with authentic Yiddish posters. If Zingeris can extract more funds, he plans to house art exhibits and erect a library in the still-vacant rooms.

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

"Temporarily, this house started to breathe again," said Zingeris, the museum's director. "It was an authentic Vilna-type performance. It was my world, a day in the life of my people, my killed people."

As a child, Hasia Shpunerflig, 80, used to frequent the theater every month for marionette shows with her classmates. The rebuilt structure prompted her memories of the original.

"We always sat in the balcony. It looked the same, except maybe a little more simple. And it was always full." For her friend, Fanya Brantsovsky, 79, who volunteers at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, the opening act, "Good Yontoff 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 after so many years. I am happy there is Yiddish again and I just never dreamed it would come from Israel."

Most of the credit goes to Yiddishpiel director Shmuel Atzmon, who pushed the language's resurgence through the Knesset in 1996. A Holocaust survivor born in Poland – he speaks nine languages as a result of his nomadic wartime journey – Atzmon says his crew postponed other commitments upon receiving a last-minute invitation from Zingeris to commemorate the theater's reopening on the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto.

"I felt a historical mission to come here and say, as the partners of Vilna used to say – here we are, '*mir zenen do*' – we are not dying. Yiddish is a wonderful stubborn culture that lived through Hitler and Stalin," said Atzmon, 72.

During its first-ever Baltic tour, Yiddishpiel performed four shows in Vilnius and one in the Latvian capital, Riga. The 14-member crew – five of whom lived under Communist rule – transported its own set that resembles the Cracow ghetto. Its Baltic expedition cost $42,000 and was sponsored in part by the Lithuanian, German and Israeli governments.

It was an emotional show for Gera Sandler, 28, a Moscow-born actor who immigrated to Israel in 1990. He has studied eastern European history and needs no reminders that 94 percent of Lithuanian Jews were killed during the Second World War.

"During this performance, I felt the souls of Jewish people who died, as if they were watching me from above," he says. "It seems to me that the actors who died here, they wanted us to continue their work." After the performance, many Litvaks expressed their gratitude to the actors.

"They were very excited and they appreciated it very much. They told us that it really, really touched their hearts and went into their souls," said Yiddishpiel veteran Israel Treistman, who joined the group when it was founded in 1987.

When asked to describe the charming characteristics of Yiddish music, Yiddishpiel music manager Lena Kopilevich, 42, replies with one word: "grandmother."

That's a long way from her childhood days in Odessa when she pleaded with her *babushka* – the Russian word for grandmother – not to speak Yiddish in public.

"Yiddish music comes from the soul," she says. "It's folk music, crying and laughing. Yiddish music is heart to heart and has the sounds of crying and kvetch. The old people here hear it and cry because it reminds them of their youth."