

Rediscovering the Vilna of old

By Milda Seputyte, VILNIUS

Most people have probably heard the common reference to Vilnius as the one-time "Jerusalem of Lithuania." The city once had a Jewish community numbering almost 70,000 people (it now has around just 4,000) and was globally admired for its creative and scientific thought, as well as the standardization of Yiddish, which only 60 years ago was spoken by half the Vilnius population. While Vilnius has nothing like that number of Jewish people living there now, there is a concerted effort among the city's Jewish population to protect the cultural riches of the past for future generations to enjoy. So it is that each summer dozens of people from all over the world come to spend their summers in Vilnius to study Yiddish and learn all about the traumatic history of Vilnius' Jews.

Yiddish studies

Vilne, Vilna, Vilno - all three of these Jewish words denote the city that is better known as Vilnius nowadays. In interwar Vilnius, unlike other European cities with a large Jewish population, the local languages did not displace the use of Yiddish. It was only natural therefore that Vilnius should have become a center for various Jewish political and cultural movements.

"The name of Vilna resonates in the cultural subconsciousness of the Jewry all over the world as a cultural center," said director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, Mendy Cahan.

And, indeed, it is rather symbolic that dozens of students from all around the world have been gathering in Vilnius over the past seven years in order to reconnect with the Yiddish language and culture that once flourished in Lithuania.

For Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews), Yiddish was what they called their mother tongue and the language of everyday communication. It was a mixture of several German dialects that were brought in from the territory of medieval Germany,



LEARNING FROM THE PAST: Vilnius Yiddish Institute director Mendy Cahan (photo) believes that the Yiddish language program is helping to reestablish the importance of Vilnius as a center of Jewish culture.

along with elements of Hebrew enriched with Slavisms and aspects of other Eastern European languages. Distinctly differing as it did from the Yiddish of neighboring countries, the Yiddish dialect in Lithuania laid the foundations for the Yiddish literary language.

As of July 28 this year, a multinational group of students has started attending the seventh annual Vilnius summer program in Yiddish language and culture in order to learn the language that was spoken by 50-million Jewish people before the war.

An intensive program involving daily three-hour language lessons in the classroom and up to two hours of homework enables the beginners to get along in Yiddish by the end of the program.

The fact that the students come from some 16 countries helps cre-

ate an advantageous environment for learning the language. Such a diverse cross section of people gathering together in Eastern Europe doesn't necessarily have English as a common tongue - which is what most language students normally use after classes in Western countries - therefore these students have to find their way in Yiddish.

The summer program is organized by the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, which also promotes general knowledge about Yiddish and Jewish culture. Having coproduced documentaries about the memories of Holocaust survivors and worked on the linguistic atlas of Yiddish, the institute assiduously collects the remains of Yiddish culture in Lithuania.

"Yiddish heritage is in danger. We need to be ecological with culture, as it were; we have to recycle to go ahead. A respect for culture assures us of continuity," said Cahan.

Lita, sweet Lita

The Jewish population started to settle in Lita (Jewish Lithuania) in the 14th century, when the country was still largely pagan. Lita stretched from the Baltic Sea in the northwest to Bialystok and Brest at its southwest, to close to Smolensk in Russia.

It was the political tolerance of pagan Lithuania that helped the Jews comfortably settle in the country and establish their thriving community.

"From the end of the 18th century until the Holocaust, the Lithuanian Jews, seeking a new identity for themselves, created a social, political and intellectual life that, through its intensity and variety, could not be compared to any other throughout the entire Diaspora. Vilnius, which became the center for various Jewish movements, was called the Jerusalem of Lithuania," wrote Jonas Morkus in his book "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

And the variety of the interwar Yiddish cultural activities could

even serve as a paragon for some modern communities. Four Yiddish dailies were printed in Vilnius in addition to many other periodicals.

Moreover, local activists maintained the Jewish culture with a symphony orchestra, several choirs and a professional drama theater. The books that were printed in the city were used worldwide. And before their destruction, Vilnius had approximately 110 synagogues and study institutes. At

taste of the past, ranging from musical workshops, cooking seminars to historic tours.

On their field trips, the students visit small towns, or the so-called "shtetl," that once served as the center of the lives of Jewish people in Lithuania. Jews constituted about half of the populations of many towns and each shtetl had a distinctive topography. In front of the synagogue there was a large marketplace surrounded by Jewish shops, and each such community

"The name of Vilna resonates in the cultural subconsciousness of the Jewry all over the world as a cultural center."

Mendy Cahan, director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

the moment, there is only one synagogue in the entire city.

The Institute for Jewish Research, which collected ethnological data and established the rules of standard Yiddish, was founded in 1925 and functioned up until 1940, when it relocated to New York.

Spirit of rediscovery

When the summer program in Yiddish language and culture was established seven years ago, there was a real pioneering spirit among those who first attended it. But now that the program has become well established, the participants can enjoy a far wider range of cultural activities.

"I am a singer and sing songs from the old Vilna ghetto, so it was very interesting for me to study Yiddish here, which is a special thing to do, almost a statement," said Iioica Czakis, a student on the program from Argentina.

The cultural side of the Vilnius summer program is also suitably diverse to give the students a real

maintained a school, an orphanage and a bathhouse.

Even though the program is not designed to study the Holocaust, the cultural program always touches upon the annihilation of the European Jews.

"In the minds of the students, this is a place of destruction, so our aim is to rejuvenate the place as a place of creativity and learning, to try to go beyond the destruction and to reconnect to the creativity of Vilna. The way of tackling the Holocaust has changed over the years. It's not easy for the students to look directly at the magnitude of the annihilation," said Cahan.

While walking down the streets where Lithuanian Jewish culture once flourished, it's hard not to find your imagination stimulated by the experience. From the city's architecture to the ambience ingrained in its Old Town streets, the heritage of Jewish culture is still tangible in so many ways, and this is what helps new generations reconnect with their roots. □

The week in weather



	Thu Aug. 5	Fri Aug. 6	Sat Aug. 7	Sun Aug. 8	Mon Aug. 9	Tue Aug. 10
Estonia	15°/24°C	13°/23°	14°/22°	14°/22°	14°/24°	12°/22°
Latvia	17°/24°	16°/24°	16°/23°	15°/23°	14°/22°	14°/22°
Lithuania	15°/23°	15°/23°	14°/21°	14°/20°	12°/20°	13°/21°