

Text of Dovid Katz's speech, delivered at the Book Launch of *Sounds of Silence* at Vilnius Old Town Hall on 12 May 2009. Consecutive translation into Lithuanian by Birutė Ušinskaitė

Good evening, thank you, thank you. It's an honor to be asked to speak at the launch of this masterwork of conceptual and photographic art. *Sounds of Silence* is a work of partnership of the collaborative genius of Raimondas Paknys and Isaac Zibuts. Thanks are due to the other outstanding specialists who made this wonderful book possible: the meticulous research by Dr. Lara Lempertienė; editor Audra Kairienė; and translator Vida Urbonavičius-Watkins.

First, I want to clarify my own minimal role in the project (and it was a very late one too). I guess I contributed the name *Sounds of Silence*, and, as UK Ambassador Simon Butt has just noted, that came from a certain 1960s song by Simon and Garfunkel, who are rumored to be of part Litvak descent.

I was asked to write the preface. That was the easier of the two assignments, and let me not fail now to mention what a high honor it has been to see it translated by the great Lithuanian writer and humanist Tomas Venclova.

For me the far more difficult assignment was to review the Yiddish names of all those Lithuanian towns, in the format of an illustrated book, where there is no time or space for a long discussion of the multiple forms for each name, from different periods, in different styles, at differing levels of formality. I had to select only one. So why was it so difficult?

Because, you see, anyone who touches such a project immediately takes upon himself an awesome responsibility: in one sense or another, even on one little detail of culture and language, to speak for a people that was annihilated.

Who am I to decide? It was humbling and frightening, to have to decide, for example, whether the town now known as Švenčionėliai, in its one Yiddish appearance in our book, will be recorded as: Náy-Svintsyán, Kléyn-Svintsyán, or, the one I selected, beloved of my late father: Svintsyánke. Or, take the town that is today Zarasai: Which of the equally "real" names from previous generations to select? Novo-Aleksándrovsk, Nay-Aleksánder, Aleksánder, Sėnder or —Sėnderke? (I'm not going to tell you which one I took. You have to look in the book!).

Raimondas Paknys and Isaac Zibuts have produced a momentous work of photographic art that will live on, when all of us gathered here tonight at Vilnius

Rotušė will have passed from this earth. The art of the forsaken, neglected, and time-worn stone, brick, wood. When a house, a graveyard, a synagogue or yeshiva falls into permanent disuse, the work of time and the elements, the “Godwork of nature practiced on the works of people” give these things a mystic beauty, a beauty that has waited almost seventy years for the magnificent artist’s eye of the photo lenses of Raimondas Paknys, and also of Arūnas Baltėnas, to capture.

This book is launched at a rather painful moment in Lithuanian-Jewish relations. Because of the genocide that is called the Holocaust, the tribe of Litvaks is nearly extinct and will soon be in most real senses — extinct. Real genocide leaves an extinct race. It is no secret, this moment, that most of the disappearing tribe of Litvaks are deeply disappointed with various of Lithuania’s state institutions, including those that accuse, instead of honoring, Holocaust survivors who heroically resisted the Nazis; those that manipulate genocide issues in the European Parliament; those that fail to curb the most primitive outbursts of antisemitism in the press and media. You know, this media campaign, allowed by state authorities to continue, is not only “words”; it has only to enflame one person to do something beyond words. It is a sad confluence of events, that the famous old wooden synagogue of Pokróy, so beautifully photographed in this book, was set on fire nine days ago.

It is even more compelling to recall that the wooden synagogue of Pokróy was famous before the war for its internal wall paintings. Some were portrayals of biblical passages. But most famous of all was the picture of the train pulling up to the town’s newly built railway station. The congregants of this prayerhouse were so very proud of their town’s achievement, that they memorialized it inside their sacred house of worship.

Our living, tiny, embattled, Jewish community here in Lithuania, so inspiringly led by Dr. Shimon Alperovich, is a treasure of this country, to be cherished, and, although myself a stranger in your midst, I am very proud to be a card-carrying member of the Jewish Community of Lithuania.

And, I am very proud to have brought with me today to this gathering a member of the Jewish community here, one of my closest friends in Vilnius, the last Jew from the shtetl Namóksht (a beautiful image from its cemetery is on p. 155). He descends from rabbis of the town, and though close to eighty-five years

of age and blind, he travels to the forsaken cemetery each year to visit and say the kaddish prayer. Berl Glazer, perhaps the only religious Litvak left in Lithuania of the older generation, has come to be with us today. *Berke, shtel zakh úfət* [‘Berl, please stand up’].

But my friends, the disappointment, the anger, the frustration, are not, and must never be misconstrued to be, with the Lithuanian people! No! There have been so many wonderful Lithuanian initiatives in a completely different spirit, to mention only one tonight: Linas Vildžiunas’s House of Memory. Linas is here tonight, and I want to thank him, by the way, for bringing me to this book and for stubbornly persisting in the effort.

And truth to tell, one of the highpoints of Lithuanian-Jewish affairs are the magnificent books produced by bold, progressive and humanistic Lithuanian publishers who are not inhibited by local politics. They are making a major and permanent contribution to Litvak Studies internationally, and frankly, to the high prestige of Lithuania around the world. It was, incidentally, a true honor for me last month to participate in the Lithuanian Publishers Association exhibition at the London Book Fair.

My opinion is that this book, which is indirectly the story of the near-total destruction of a people, is also a story of deep appreciation and love for all that they were and that they created. It will be internationally acclaimed for its honesty, its originality, and its use of high photographic art and book design to highlight a longing for the lost content of (by Joseph Levinson’s count) two-hundred-and-thirty-nine destroyed Jewish communities of Lithuania. And that brings me to my final point:

We cannot bring back destroyed people and communities. But these stark reminders, in brick and in stone and in wood, produced in such magnificent beauty by Paknys Press in Vilnius, call out to so-inspired individuals, whether it is Lithuanians, Jews or others, to come and begin to study, to look into, to save whatever little we can still save of the culture whose remains have been so lovingly captured on the pages of this beautiful new book. Thank you, thank you, dear Raimondas and Isaac and Lara; and Audra and Vida and Arūnas; thank you all who are here with us tonight.