

RE: The Vilnius Jewish Library

A call for transparency

Open letter by Richard Schofield

with response from Žilvinas Beliauskas and Mark Splinter
with excerpt from defendinghistory.com by Wyman Brent

Reproduced from www.vilniusjewishlibrary.com

contact:

info@richardschofieldphotography.com

Richard Schofield
Veteranų 14-31
Visaginas
Lithuania

November 2, 2011

To whom it may concern,

My name is Richard Schofield and I'm a British citizen who's been living and working in Lithuania for over 10 years. For most of that time I've been involved in writing about the culture and history of Lithuania, a country I consider to be my second home and one which I've dedicated the best part of the last decade promoting internationally. I'm currently the Editor of Vilnius In Your Pocket as well as several other Lithuanian city guides published by the In Your Pocket publishing group, an international company started and still based in Lithuania that I'm proud to be associated with.

In 2009 I made a small donation to Mr. Wyman Brent, the American founder of the Vilnius Jewish Library and a man who I respect very much for his tireless efforts over the last few years in trying to find a permanent home for his collection. At the time of my donation, Mr. Brent led everyone to believe that the library would be an entirely independent body, separate from the often sordid world of Lithuanian politics and business. In 2011 however it was announced that the library will be housed in a building owned by the Lithuanian state, who will also be responsible for the running of the library, the hiring and firing of its staff etc. To this end, the Lithuanian state has contributed 700,000Lt (about €202,000) to the renovation of the premises in which the (public) library will be located. Many of the 5,000 or so items in Mr. Brent's collection were bought using his own money. However, a not insignificant part of the collection has also been donated by people such as myself. It's because of this latter fact that I'm writing this letter.

As a taxpayer in Lithuania I'm seriously concerned about the use and provenance of this money as well as exactly how it's being spent. I've contacted both Mr. Brent and representatives of the Adomo Mickevičiaus Viešoji Biblioteka (Adomas Mickevičius Public Library), under whose jurisdiction the Vilnius Jewish Library falls, to try and receive an answer to this simple question, a question I've received no reply to. It's no secret that the money was requisitioned from Vilnius' disgraced Royal Palace project, a fact that I find somewhat disturbing. As a functioning democracy and a member state of the European Union, I believe the Lithuanian state has a responsibility to both the library's donors and to the taxpayers of Lithuania to explain the situation.



R A Schofield

Mark SPLINTER

I too pay tax in Lithuania, and I believe transparency is essential in all areas of government. I support Richard's letter, share his questions, and have gladly donated resources to make this webpage possible.

Žilvinas Beliauskas

A very strange question. This is an ordinary procedure to support culture, Sco. Do you want somebody to explain how everyday procedures between state institutions take place? And it was in the press how it became possible to finance the VJL - "Panevezio trestas" construction company working with the Royal Palace was found by the State Control doing something wrong or illegal in contract fulfillment and prosecutors stopped its activity there. In such a way a considerable amount of finances allocated for Royal Palace (16 mln. Litas) were released and transferred by the Ministry of Culture to various other cultural objects - theaters, concert halls, whatever and 653 thousand for Vilnius Jewish Library reconstruction of given premises on Gedimino 24 since there was an earlier decision by the Government to establish the library -<http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/a...>

And it is one of the Holocaust year commemoration events.

I can't get what you find mysterious about that? Do you want to know the cost of the bricks, paints, workers salaries etc.? I am sure you can get it. I saw the project and there is nothing strange or not transparent absolutely. These things are being observed very closely by control institutions.

Žilvinas B.

Žilvinas Beliauskas

Yes, and after the official opening of the library on December 16, there will be a Day of Open Doors and everybody is welcome to come to see the library. On regular basis it should start working and accept visitors in the beginning of the next year.

Richard Schofield

Ok, I'm in no particular hurry with this. Let's start with your first sentence Zilvinas. What question?

Richard Schofield

I no, I jumped ahead of myself a bit. There's a couple of hundred people looking at this page. Maybe you should start by introducing yourself Zilvinas.

Mark Splinter

"These things are being observed very closely by control institutions." ... and so was Valdovu Rumai?

Žilvinas Beliauskas

Yes, Sco, I've been coordinating the project for two years and that's why I know the details. And the strangeness of your question lies in demonstrating ignorance of how state budget is handled and asking rather trivial things. About the budget formation and the way it is implemented you can read on the website of the Ministry of finance. Mark, namely control institutions stopped Valdovu Rumai construction after finding discrepancies or whatever they should be called there.

Žilvinas Beliauskas

While coordinating the project I've participated in numerous meetings and organized three presentations of the library to be. Now a webpage of the library is under construction (I will announce the address) and I will definitely post the history of the project development. And below find photos and some info from those events and the project in Forward (the last link):

[links removed – available on www.vilniusjewishlibrary.com]

Mark Splinter

Zilvinai - the issue is the influence of money in state projects. Democracy dies behind closed doors. This project was started as an independent project and donors supported it, some of them gave donations BECAUSE the project was independent. Now it is no longer independent, and the unknown makeup of the board, the qualifications of the staff, the ownership of the donations, and the political influence that can be exerted on the project are causing concerns amongst donors, past and potential. If you have such information, you can simply write it in a letter to Richard. Can't you? We're not asking for a fight, we are asking for simple information which would take you 10 minutes to write in an email, if it's all so simple. Absolutely nothing you say responds to Richard's letter. You have not addressed the issue of financial control and political influence over a supposedly educational institution which was previously advertised as independent from the state. Expressing surprise at the question while dodging the answer is not a sufficiently convincing response, in my view. "Participating in numerous meetings" means nothing if you don't show us the minutes.

Transparency of this state institution's organisation, control, and funding, is a very simple democratic request which you have failed to comprehend, let alone address. Please do not take this as a personal insult, it is a simple request for information about how state resources are allocated (the source of the state's resources being namely myself, Richard, other donors, and millions of taxpayers).

Žilvinas Beliauskas

Dear Mark, I still can't get the point about your question concerning financial control of state run institutions. It is outlined in the legislation of every country. Roughly, democracy works like that: you vote for parties with their programs, they come to power and are entitled to form state budgets, to legislate and to make decisions. Ministries are in charge of allocated funds to implement programs, to decide upon actual arising questions, to exercise both stability concerning principal issues and flexibility in the face changing situations, problems and opportunities. If their work is bad or poor the ruling powers are simply outvoted during next elections and officials breaking laws are prosecuted. It is your right as well as Sco's to ask for information and nothing is behind closed doors. It is also your right to criticize certain actions or decision making by the Government. If you consider Vilnius Jewish Public Library to be a mistake and a bad thing for cultural life of Vilnius you surely are to express your opinion and to give your suggestions as well as arguments why you are against the library. You can campaign according to legal procedures; say demand a referendum to abolish it (you would need to collect certain amount of signatures). But now it was the Government and to the Ministry of Culture entitled to make this decision and they made that it because considered the idea and the project being nice and worth supporting it. And I wrote numerous letters trying to advocate, persuade and to prove it being worth. The financial side is absolutely transparent and all the figures are accessible and available. I don't have exact and detailed at my hand but it is around 700 thousand lt. for renovation and estimates to have less than 200 thousand each year for all the costs of heating, electricity, communication, salaries etc.

What concerns so called independence here I would really love you to explain how a library can function with no place to place the books, tables and chairs for readers to sit, with no volunteers or paid staff, with nobody to cover all the costs of running the place and having it warm in winter and illuminated during dark day hours. How? Wyman is very upset by declarations by Sco and now by yourself that it was

supposed to be "independent". It was started as dependent on Wyman himself in particular and he began looking for who else might become "dependent" and become part of the project since the truth is he had no funds to do it "independently", just on himself. He might have become "independently" dependant on other donors but guess if he managed to find them and to be able to turn heap of books into library. For some reasons I am not familiar with, the negotiations with the local Jewish institutions to integrate his collection into their structures failed. He was tired, exhausted and frustrating when I met him. And we started working together because I was fascinated with the idea too. And Wyman feels especially upset about Sco's claims about "the planned independence" simply because it is not true. He says he's been never stating this kind of things to him and now is made to look like a liar. He simply wanted a Jewish library with no clear or very distinct understanding how formally it is arranged and where financing has to come from. It is not his strongest side. He simply had a dream which now is close to its fulfillment. I really do not understand certain irritation being aroused by this success to somebody. It looks as if all what would please such audience is all sorts of failures and bad news. As long as the library idea could be evaluated as experiencing various sorts of neglect and obstacles it was appreciated and "supported". Now it is the other way round. Here is exactly the same campaign as on Facebook. Why and what for? Can anybody be convinced that the tax issue became so sharp namely at this point? To my mind - nobody.

Mark Splinter

"The financial side is absolutely transparent and all the figures are accessible and available."
Please could tell us where to look, because it sounds like it would answer some questions very easily.

Mark Splinter

⤴ <http://defendinghistory.com/wyman-brent-founder-of-vilnius-jewish-library-assures-supporters-of-library%E2%80%99s-integrity/20396#more-20396>

[link to Wyman Brent's article about the library's independence from Lithuanian politics, reproduced overleaf, emphasis added:]

Wyman Brent, Founder of Vilnius Jewish Library, Assures Supporters of Library's Integrity

30 July 2011

OPINION

by Wyman Brent

I have a concern which I am sure that the readers of *DefendingHistory.com* share. I am talking about the possibility of the Vilnius Jewish Library becoming a vehicle for certain elements of the Lithuanian government to continue to whitewash and obfuscate history and to cover up for the antisemitism currently rampant here.

The problem is that I as one person cannot keep everything right on track all by myself. I receive no salary and no subsidy for my work. I am not asking for riches. All I wish for is that the [Vilnius Jewish Library](#) be true to the vision which I have shared with our many supporters. There needs to be an international spotlight constantly shining on the library. It needs to be in the media frequently. Readers recall our successful efforts in 2009 [to halt the sale of the Vilna Ghetto Library building](#) on Žemaitijos – the former Strashun Street.

Only by keeping up pressure and confronting the government when necessary will it be possible to keep the library from turning into a bad joke.

The Lithuanian government now has a chance to show its sincerity and understanding of the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust by ending the [shambolic celebration of those who murdered Jews](#).

They can also turn the [Museum of Genocide Victims](#) into a place which will be appropriately named and one which will prominently acknowledge within its own walls that an actual genocide did indeed take place in the country – of nearly the entire Jewish population of Lithuania.

The Ministry of Education can print textbooks which admit that there were very many Lithuanians who willingly and happily took part in the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews – the Jews of Lithuania; Jews deported from elsewhere for murder here; Jews killed in Belarus and other countries by specialist Lithuanian killers. What happened at Ponár was primarily done at the hands of volunteer Lithuanians.

The Foreign Minister should issue a full apology to the Jewish community for his [insensitive and blatantly antisemitic remarks](#). The General Prosecutor needs to act immediately and in an unambiguous way in announcing that [the Jewish partisans under investigation](#) are under no suspicion of any kind, that they are heroes of Lithuania for helping to liberate this country from the Nazi yoke. That is precisely how the late president and prime minister [Algirdas Brazauskas characterized](#) these heroic veterans.

There needs to be acknowledgment of the rampant official antisemitism. Clearly the annihilated Jews of Lithuania are not considered to be Lithuanian citizens at the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius. The Jew to be found on display at the museum, or at the [Soviet statue park \(Gruto parkas\)](#) is painted as a collective Communist aggressor, one and all, and as the reason why Lithuania was forced into the Soviet Union. The logic is that the Jews were somehow responsible even for the postwar occupation though 95% of those in Lithuania were murdered before the summer of 1944 was over. It makes no difference to them that not one Jew was part of the official delegation which went from Lithuania to Moscow to ask for “admittance” into the Soviet Union.

Why does the Lithuanian government not admit that many of the heroes of the resistance to the Soviet forces first learned to use weapons by training those guns on helpless men, women, and children whose only crime happened to be that they are Jewish? Put simply, the murderers of their civilian neighbors should not be glorified whatever their political orientation.

Yes, there are some Lithuanian resistance fighters who did not first kill Jews. Why not celebrate them by name, instead of giving blanket approval to even those who were known by name and deed to have killed unarmed civilians? Why not let the year 2011 be the year of Holocaust Remembrance of Lithuanian Jews without [needing to “balance” that](#) with a concurrent year that celebrates the perpetrators?

As everyone knows, I am working closely with various elements of the Lithuanian government to turn my dream of a new center of Jewish life and culture into reality. I have not personally experienced antisemitic attitudes from any Lithuanian official working with me on this project.

Yet I am deeply troubled by initiatives such as the [Prague Declaration](#).

I am troubled by the defamation of Jewish partisans [whose only crime was](#) that they did not lay down and die in the face of the Nazi monster.

I am troubled by the fact that in 2010 a court in Lithuania [declared the swastika to be a national symbol of the nation](#). Does Lithuania not have enough symbols and emblems to be proud of without turning to an originally very innocent symbol that now and forever more will always be an emblem of pain for the entire Jewish community?

Does the average Lithuanian citizen really think that their country would have been better off under the Nazi regime? The Nazis at best would have treated Lithuania as a vassal state supplying land and labor for “real” Aryans. By 1989 there would have been no Lithuania to make independent. A real Aryan of the day did not include any Lithuanians. Just as today, in the eyes of many ministries and museums, a real Lithuanian cannot, it seems, be a Jew.

The library, scheduled to open in Vilnius this November, is for all Lithuanian citizens, no matter what their religion or ethnicity. Yet I will not stand by and let the library become a symbol of what the government is supposedly “doing for the Jews” while at the same time pushing in the European Union for such nonsense as the Prague Declaration, the Prague Process, the unitary day of red-brown remembrance (in effect replacing Holocaust Remembrance Day), and sundry resolutions that all share one goal: to downgrade the Holocaust.

One cannot be a Janus on the world stage. Those days should have ended the day the world saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Lithuania needs to look forward and to the West. Looking backward and toward the Soviet days and its two-faced games does not bring honor to any nation.

The honorable, long suffering and hard working people of Lithuania deserve better. I want the Vilnius Jewish Library to be part of the bold new future.

Žilvinas Beliauskas

If you are critical about the Lithuanian Government in general you are free to express your opinion in all the democratic and legal (preferably cultural) way.

Žilvinas Beliauskas

Mark, you keep surprising me. Of course all the figures are kept by book-keepers and internal revenue is checked by control institutions (Valstybes kontrole). Are you serious you want to check all the receipts and to the price of bricks for the renovation? I believe if it is your dream one day you can be a success. Also, I believe that questions about financing will be raised during the press conference before the opening and there will be reliable answers.

If you are critical about the Lithuanian Government you are free to express your opinion in all the democratic and legal (preferably cultural) ways, but it does not sound honest when you are trying artificially and inadequately to (taxes and finance - ha) to undermine with your exclamations the very idea and success of such a nice project which might serve so well for culture, cultural exchange and humanism in general. I don't think I am going to discuss with you further on. I prefer positive attitude and luckily enough there are plenty of those who share it.

All the best!

Mark Splinter

"The financial side is absolutely transparent and all the figures are accessible and available."

Zilvinai, I am just interested what these accessible figures are, and where they are available. If you can't help me find the information you say is accessible, then I don't agree with your definition of accessible. There's absolutely no way my enquiry "undermines" the project, you've said it's all clean and accessible, so I am just asking for a web link or an email address to start looking for it. I don't know why you are making negative assumptions about my intentions, I am a law student and an interested active European citizen. Answering my enquiries about funding, or helping me find someone who can, will only strengthen the credibility of the project, surely. Wyman has reassured us the library will not be a distorted political tool, and I believe public scrutiny of the sources and control of the funding, the appointment and qualification of staff, etc, is essential to dispel these worries.

Response from Richard Schofield overleaf...

⤴ **Richard Schofield responds:**

Zilvinas,

In what's now been several posts here you've managed to say less than nothing, you've failed to introduce yourself and you've generally behaved like Ceausescu not long before he was spotted running for his helicopter. You did the same on Facebook, to one of your donors (Stacye Mehard), who among other things said (and I quote) "I also am very uncomfortable in placing books I have donated to the government collection. That was never the intent as i understood it." In fact you completely ignored her concerns preferring to have a self-congratulatory five minutes with Wyman's girlfriend about how 'nice' your library is. And talking of the concerns of donors (which is what my letter is really all about and which you continually fail to address, which in my opinion is not only a dereliction of duty but an insult to the people who've effectively put you in the position you're now in... whatever that is... you still haven't had the decency to introduce yourself), how about this one from Sir Martin Gilbert in an email to me in response to my letter, "Thank you so much for your full and helpful explanation. Much of this was new to me, including that Wyman is no longer in Vilnius, but has moved to Germany. He never told me this. Your concerns seem very real and valid to me, and I appreciate your sharing them with me so fully." It seems quite clear to me that none of you know what you're doing, that by saying 'Everything's all right' you've done your democratic duty and that the Vilnius Jewish Library is more than 'nice' as you keep calling it, it stands among other things as a memory to an entire race of people who were murdered in cold blood on the ground you stand on. Do you really not see why people are worried? Wyman has left the country, and hasn't told anybody. This is the same Wyman who was going to stay here for the rest of his life. This is another blow to the library's donors. What exactly about these issues don't you get? Finally, about money again, can you please, as the main representative of the Jewish Vilnius Library, tell me your position on Wyman's strange requests for money (I quote, from his Facebook account) "The Vilnius Jewish Library opens in less than 3 weeks. Donations are needed and appreciated. You can donate using Paypal sent to vilniusjewishlibrary@yahoo.com". What are these donations for Zilvinas? Judging from the comments underneath it, this is not a deal with the library, but the demands of an individual asking for money to be paid into his bank account, tax free, for him to spend as he wishes. Please explain how he can use the name of a Lithuanian state institution to line his own pockets. Is this not outrageous?

Richard Schofield

Finally, in the week before the library is due to open, the Lithuanian press pick up the story (albeit as far as I can make out by doing nothing more than printing the press release verbatim).

<http://www.lrytas.lt/-13236869...>

What I find disturbing about this is...

- That there are no Jews involved in the Vilnius Jewish Library (somebody prove me wrong and I'll eat every hat I see over the next Lithuanian winter - and that's a lot of hats)

- That Mr. Brent is referred to as a 'book collector' (implying that his role in the library has been (surprise surprise) swept under the carpet)

- That (and this is important) the 'open day' at the library has been planned for a SATURDAY. As you may well be aware of, many Jews, especially those of religious persuasion, are unable to involve themselves in cultural activities such as this ON THE MOST HOLY DAY OF THE WEEK. I repeat, there are no Jews involved in the Vilnius Jewish Library. If there were, they would have without fear of contradiction (feel free to contradict) pointed out the fact that arranging the first public event at the library on a Saturday was a shameful and rather dumb thing to do

There's an awful lot of other stuff in that link that makes you wonder what on earth these people are up to. I leave it up to you to decide.

Finally, as the library comes tantalisingly close to opening its doors, I say again, as a TAX PAYER in Lithuania I find it tasteless that my money is being wasted on such a pointless project. I don't write this as a person who thinks governments are stupid for investing money in cultural projects (I think the complete opposite), but don't you think it's a disgrace that Lithuania, with enough financial burdens on its plate at the moment, is making a serious mistake in opening a Jewish library where no Jews are involved?

I originally wrote my letter of protest in the hope that the Vilnius Jewish Library would respond to my concerns in an intelligent manner and at least make me think a little. In actual fact, as you've seen in these comments, my concerns have been ridiculed. Make your own minds up.

Welcome to the new Jewish Vilnius Library.