



THE JEWISH MUSEUM - 10 YEARS OLD

The first Jewish museum of history-ethnography was established in Vilnius in 1913 by the Society of Lovers of Jewish Antiquity. It had a fairly large collection of valuable exhibits, but these were greatly damaged or stolen during the First World War.

The Society was revived in 1919 by writer and scientist An-ski (Solomon Rapoport, 1863 - 1920), and renamed the "Historical-Ethnographic Society of Lithuanian and Byelorussian Jews". The museum was revived somewhat later, and in time once again managed to acquire a collection of valuable exhibits, including various ritual objects, sculptures, paintings, examples of applied art, and a selection of coins and metal artifacts from the Bar-Kochba Period. The library contained unique old publications of scientific and talmud literature, and Kabbalistic treatises. Before the Second World War, the museum had accumulated more than 3,000 exhibition items, 6,000 books, and letters and memoirs written by celebrated public figures. There were historical chronicles - "pinkasim", more than 100,000 documents, photographs of distinguished personalities, sets of letters in eleven languages, and a rich collection of folklore. The art collection included sculptures by M. Antokolski, and works by I. Repin, L. Bakst, and other famous artists. Among the most valuable historical documents were the original parchment texts of the Privileges granted to the Jews by Lithuania's leaders, and the works of well known religious authorities R. Menachem Mendel Lubavich, R. Zalman Schneur, R. A. Slonim, and others. The main (folklore) section of the An-ski archive was later given to the YIVO Jewish Scientific Institute. In 1935 the museum came under the disposal of the Jewish Community.

When Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union in 1940, the museum was handed over to the People's Education Commissariat, and on May 14, 1941 to the LSSR Academy of Sciences. Even during the period of the Second World War, the Jewish intelligentsia were concerned with safeguarding the nation's cultural and historical heritage. Ghetto inhabitants were urged to protect their cultural and historical treasures. Documents - official German and Lithuanian decrees regarding the Jews, and Yudenrat (Jewish Council) protocols - and accounts by witnesses of various events, especially the killings, were collected under the direction of Z. Kalmanovich, H. Kruk, A. Sutzkever, and others. Specially designated Ger-

man staff appointed a group of Jewish intellectuals to sort the cultural and historical treasures which had been pillaged by the Nazis. Chosen books were to be sent to the Oriental Institute in Frankfurt. (After the war, fragments of the collection were found and taken to YIVO in the USA.) The brigade sorting the books and documents tried in all ways possible to safeguard this unique legacy. Dozens of hiding places were organized, and books and documents were sometimes carried away tied to the body. But once the ghetto began to be liquidated, it was all left to fate, and the flames of war threatened to swallow the centuries-old treasures.

When the Soviet army occupied Vilnius in mid-July 1944, groups of partisans entering the city were joined by poets A. Sutzkever and Sh. Kacherginski; L. Ran, J. Gutkovich, and S. Beilis returned after having been evacuated, as did a small handful of Jews who had survived the concentration camps. It was decided to re-open a Jewish museum, and treasures which had been preserved in various hiding places began to flow to 6 Strashun St. The museum was given a building which had recently been the ghetto jail; the Jewish intellectuals, prone to wistful humour, called the place "our Louvre". Cultural treasures were extracted from between walls and out of stove chimneys. Bundles containing Jewish heritage were even discovered in the Gestapo cellars. Many exhibits were gathered right within ghetto territory: fragments of YIVO collections, documents of the "Vilner trupe" theatre, exhibits from the An-ski and the theatre museum archives, pages of Z. Reizen's lexicon, the original files from the archives of the Jewish CEC (Central Education Committee) gymnasium, and

thousands of cards from many years of work on Jewish lexicology by Dr. A. Landau all lay buried among the garbage. Out of those mountains of paper were catalogued 8,000 cards; 6,000 more were prepared for cataloguing, and another 5-6,000

ter the war no longer knew of the Jewish contribution to Lithuania's statehood, education, and culture.

A new period in the history of the Republic of Lithuania began with the end of the 1980s. Under LSSR decree Nr. 177, a Jewish museum was

re-established in Vilnius on Sept. 6, 1989. Its main goal was to revive the history and culture of Lithuania's Jews, and to disclose the nation's tragedy during the Second World War. This was a time of national rebirth and tolerance, of understanding and compassion for the Jewish nation. At the first exhibition of Jewish art in Kaunas in 1988, prof. C. Kudaba addressed the audience with the unaccustomed words - "Dear Jewish brothers and sisters..."

The museum has prepared and issued a number of publications, including the first guidebook on Jewish Vilnius entitled "Jerusalem of Lithuania", a monograph dedicated to the last Vilnius Jewish writer Jokūbas Jasadė, the first book of a series dedicated to people who saved Jews entitled "Hands Bringing Life and Bread", and a two volume publication entitled "Vilnius Ghetto: lists of prisoners" (graphically and accurately described by journalist S. Vaintraubas during its presentation: "Finally these people have been named and buried..."). The museum has prepared a bibliographical index entitled "Jewish reflections in the mirror of the Lithuanian press", and is organizing a catalogue of museum collections.

The museum took part in organizing a travelling exhibition entitled "Anne Frank - a lesson for our day", which was brought to Lithuania from Holland; it was presented in various cities in this country, accompanied by a series of cultural and educational programs for schools. Another museum organized travelling exhibition was dedicated to the fate of Lithuania's synagogues. The Gallery of the Righteous, located on the third floor of the museum, exudes contemplation and inspiration; it has a unique branch - a travelling exhibition which has reached both the Parliament and various schools. A museum organized exhibition of Ghetto posters became an important cultural event: both ordinary visitors, and high level officials at the Washington Congress were impressed by the steadfast spirit of those who were doomed to die...

Museum workers take part in international scientific conferences, and maintain ties with various other world museums. The museum is a member of the Lithuanian Association of Museums, the Association of European Jewish Museums, and the Association of USA Holocaust Museums.

Risen out of the ruins, the Vilnius Gaon Jewish Museum has preserved the significance of Lithuania's Jews in a world cultural context.

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Director on scientific issues



Visitors from England with Stephen Smith, head of the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Britain, at the Jewish Museum in Vilnius.

RISEN FROM THE RUINS

were slated for sorting out of the general clutter. On the cell's one window-ledge lay piled Hannukah lamps, menorahs, and other ritual items.

The former jail was damp, and the treasures were doomed to decay unless moved to another shelter. The walls wailed with hundreds of scratched, chiselled, and charred inscriptions: "Paneriai", "Remember", "Revenge"... and names, and more names. This was a memorial to Paneriai, and the walls screamed and demanded.

Gritting their teeth, the people of a Jewish Vilnius worked to organize their first exhibition. German prisoners diligently renovated a hall on the second floor of the jail-house. But the exhibition never opened, for the authorities of the first socialist country in the world - which fostered a culture "nationalistic in form and socialist in content" - simply closed the museum. All of its treasures were hauled away to the St. George Monastery, and deposited in the cellar. It was only through the efforts of an enlightened Antanas Ulpis and his colleagues from the Palace of Books that at least a part of these treasures, this "spiritual Paneriai" survived; a great deal had been plundered and removed, and another part recycled under the orders of local Soviet officials.

With the liquidation of the museum and other Jewish institutions, the topic of Jews was removed from the country's culture and history for a period of forty years. The school textbooks were silent, and people born af-

ter the war no longer knew of the Jewish contribution to Lithuania's statehood, education, and culture.

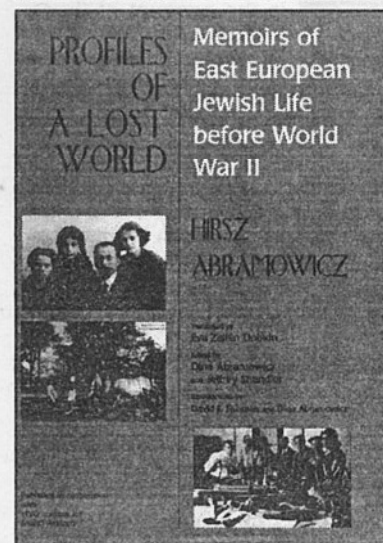
Young Vilnius University lec-



R. Kostanian at a stand dedicated to the Vilnius Gaon.

turer Emanuelis Zingeris, one of the leaders of the Jewish cultural revival, was appointed museum director.

Preparations were made for the first permanent exhibition, dedicated to the Catastrophe of the Jewish nation. There were no books about the Holocaust in Lithuania, so it entailed a painstaking study of archival documents, and books from abroad. The arrival of new workers, including VVU associate prof. and former Vilnius ghetto prisoner and partisan Rachel Margolis, former Kaunas ghetto prisoner and one of the heads of the underground Dmitrijus Gelpernas, and former lieutenant with the 16th Lithuanian Division Joseph Levinson, was extremely important. We aimed to open the exhi-



This book by former Vilnius resident Hirszt Abramowicz (1881-1960) encompasses events from the end of the 19th century to the time of the Holocaust: the revolution of 1905, the First World War, repercussions of the revolution of 1917, and the years between the two great wars. The focus of the account is the life and

A book about the people of Jerusalem of Lithuania

fate of both ordinary and famous Jews, their ability to counteract circumstances and to find ways to survive in a constantly shifting and hostile world - when governments change nearly every month (1918-1920), and when one is continuously threatened not only by hunger, but by death itself.

It is all recounted from the inside, often in an unexpected, but always clear and interesting way. The writer talks about everything: how the Jews lived in the villages and small towns (completely accurate sketches), how they earned their living, how they organized food supplies for the winter, their attitude towards each other, and their relations with the Christians... All told in a thorough and greatly respectful way.

In his sketches of the daily life of ordinary Jews, as well as in the accounts of extraordinary personalities and events, one feels the author's sympathy for those whom he is describing, ir-

respective of their difference in character or political views.

Here one finds a whole lineup of the distinguished people who lived in Vilnius at that time: librarian Chaikel Lunski who worked at the Strashun Library - a walking encyclopaedia, a man who knew the contents of nearly every book, newspaper, and journal in the library's huge collections; lawyer Joseph Chernichov, who made prosecutors - unable to withstand his logic, erudition, and determination - tremble; Isaac Rubinstein, rabbi of Jerusalem of Lithuania at the age of 29, deputy to the Polish Parliament, and a senator (respected by even the fiercest anti-Semites for his irreproachable honesty and courage) who saved the Jews from pogroms on more than one occasion; Dr. Tzemach Shabad - there could hardly have been a single person who would not have turned to him for help during his 40 years as medical doctor and public activist - a wonderful or-

ganizer of medical services, he established children's nurseries, shelters, and hospitals (including the first specialized hospital for tuberculosis in the world), and was often the first to adopt new ideas and methods of treatment and prevention of disease; Jakov Vygodski - doctor and public activist, fearless fighter and advocate, to the very end of his life, for the Jews and their right to a decent life - a man of such authority that even the worst scoundrels and hooligans dared not lift a hand against him during anti-Semitic attacks. And then there were Z. Reizen, H. Kruk, A. Grodzinski, and many others... The style of the book is bright, simple, clear, memorable, accurate, not without humour ("in jail the police would refuse our demands, insultingly summoning the name of our mother", "the air in the prison cell was so thick you could cut it with a knife", and so on).

The book contains little known, but important historical

events: the mass annihilation of intellectually handicapped people, organized by the Germans in occupied territories back in 1915; the founding of the first Jewish agricultural school in Vėliučionys (near Vilnius); the organizing (near Valkininkai) of work therapy - non-existent in the world - for 200 intellectually handicapped people, etc. The life of Hirszt Abramowicz is the history of his period, presented in a talented, intelligent, and sincere manner; there is no doubt that his name should be written alongside those of the Individuals whom he recalls with such warmth and love.

The book has been published in English by YIVO in New York. It was prepared for publication by the author's daughter, former Vilnius Ghetto prisoner Dina Abramovich, and by Geoffrey Shandler. Preface to the book written by Dovyd Fishman and Dina Abramovich.

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