

Historian whose task is remembrance of the Holocaust



Rachel Kostanian

When Rachel Kostanian speaks, the words come tumbling out so quickly one wonders how she has time to breathe. And what this 80-something, fiery-haired historian lives and breathes is remembrance of the Holocaust. Her field is Lithuania, her focal point Vilnius – Vilna or Vilne to the Jews, and Rachel brings the story to life as she describes each alleyway, doorway and window that mask the fate of Vilna's Jews.

Rachel chronicles each step along the journey. Here is the doorway where the Jews of Vilna gathered to beseech Jacob Gens, the elder of the Ghetto Jewish Council, for the lifesaving slips of paper that qualified the bearer for work, as the colour of the paper changed and the quantity was reduced.

There is the alleyway leading to the prison where Vilna's resistance commander, 36-year-old Yizhak Wittenberg, spent his last night, having given himself up to the Germans in the deceptive belief that doing so would save the ghetto.

Nearby are the windows of the Mefitze Haskole on Strashun Street, where Herman Kruk created a lending library and led the celebration on Dec. 13, 1942, when book number 100,000 was taken out.

Rachel Kostanian has investigated each event and every place. History and geography are woven together as a doorway or a hidden corner inspire a torrent of words in Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian or English.



By Esther Goldberg

In Rachel's voice, the stones themselves cry out. "I feel the shadows of those who perished," she notes. Through her, they come to life.

An only child in a loving and educated Bundist family, Rachel first experienced anti-Semitism when the son of her family's Lithuanian housekeeper greeted her each day with taunts and stones. She was filled with shame, but finally got the courage to shout back at him.

After the June 1940 Soviet occupation, Rachel's father Yosif Zivelchinski, a lawyer, became chief judge for their town of Siauliai (Shavli) and the surrounding areas. With the German advance into Lithuania in June 1941, Rachel and her mother, Bluma, were sent with the families of other officials into the Soviet Union, settling in Gorky. Yosif returned to Shavli. Rachel and Bluma learned later that he was killed by German paratroopers.

In Gorky, Bluma and Rachel survived amid the deprivations of Soviet wartime existence. Rachel was sent to a *kinderheim* in the Ural Mountains, where 200 Lithuanian children, some of whom were Jewish, found refuge.

There, with the help of the Jewish director, the children followed on a large map the advance of the Red Army and escaped into music to forget their hunger, lice and the worry about their families.

At the end of 1944, with the Red Army advancing

westward, the children were put on trains to return to Lithuania. Rachel got off in Gorky and was reunited with her mother.

With liberation, Vilnius again became the capital of Lithuania, having been part of Poland since shortly after the end of the First World War.

The murder of Vilna's Jews in the Soviet-dug fuel pits in the forest of Ponar, the murder of the Jews of Kaunas (Kovno) in the 19th century fortresses that ring the city, most notably the Ninth Fort and the 245 mass murder sites throughout Lithuania, were the remains of Lithuania's 600-year-old, devout and enlightened Jewish community. With Lithuania's postwar incorporation into the Soviet Union, the murdered Jews of Lithuania were included in war memorials as Soviet Citizens, not Jews.

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'All of a sudden, I found my roots'

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Reunited with her daughter in Gorky, Bluma was prepared to stay in Russia. It was Rachel who persuaded her that they must return home to Lithuania. Eventually Bluma found work in Vilna as the director of a library and she and Rachel were given a small room in the library corridor. Rachel not only lived in the library, she lived with the library. It was there, she remembers, "the greatest writers in the world became accessible and enriched my mind and formed me."

Rachel finished school and graduated from Vilnius State University having studied Soviet law. She began her lecturing career speaking in barbershops on the Soviet constitution, while working as a cleaner in the library and later as a junior librarian.

Despite her law degree, due to anti-Semitic attitudes she

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was never able to work in law, except as an aid to the dean of the criminal law faculty.

She spent evenings studying English and qualified to study English at the State Pedagogical Institute, when she met her husband Genrich, an electrical engineer. Like others, he had been sent from the Soviet Republic of Armenia to Lithuania, where there was a shortage of professional engineers.

Genrich had promised his mother to bring his bride to Armenia, so the couple spent four years in Kirovakan. During this time their son was born. Rachel returned to Lithuania for the birth and brought her mother back to Armenia, where Rachel taught English in a music school. "I would dance and sing with the children in English."

Rachel's homesickness for Lithuania won out in the end. In 1960, the family returned to Vilna. Still unable to get work in law, she got a job as a translator in her husband's factory. From 1969, she translated technical journals at a welding institute.

In 1987, everything changed. One day while walking in Vilna Rachel saw a large Magen David on an advertising pole. Her first thought was: "My God, they are taking us to concentration camps again!" It was a horrific moment.

"In a couple of seconds during which I saw trains packed with people, barbed wire on the windows, and so on, I saw — it is a Jewish exhibition! In Kaunas!" On opening day, "the train from Vilna to Kovno was packed with our people rushing to the miracle." The miracle that Rachel found was that she was no longer alone: "All of a sudden I found my roots. Like everyone else, I have a people, a language, a culture."



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The exhibition had its origins with Emanuelis Zingeris and his brother Markas, children of survivors from Kovno. Emanuelis was active in the Lithuanian independence movement, and later served for 18 years in the Lithuanian parliament.

At Vilnius University, Emanuelis had written his dissertation on Lithuania's Jewish cultural heritage, a courageous act in those dangerous times. Discovering and promoting that cultural heritage became his life's work.

In 1989, as part of the Perestroika plans for the new Lithuania, the Lithuanian Soviet government asked each minority to set up a cultural foundation and provide a list of its needs. Emanuelis, with other Jewish intellectuals, established a Jewish Cultural Society and asked for the recreation of the Jewish Museum, commemoration of the Shoah, streets named after known Jews, plaques to be put up on former Jewish historic sites and the Jewish cemeteries to be put in order. All these were accepted by the government. Having volunteered to help Emanuelis, Rachel left her translating job and became the full-time scientific secretary of the Lithuanian State Jewish Museum.

Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerl Kacerginsky, poets in prewar Vilna, had hidden valuable documents and archives in the ghetto and outside it. Having survived with the partisans, in 1944 to 1945, they recovered these archives and set up a Jewish Museum. Within four years the museum was closed by the KGB. Some of the material Sutzkever and Kacerginsky collected went to YIVO in New York; some was taken over by the Soviet authorities, but still carries a Jewish Museum stamp.

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The locals must know

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In 1989, Emanuelis Zingeris secured a premises for the new Jewish Museum in a small wooden building that had formerly belonged to the Museum of the Russian October Revolution of 1917.

Rachel's husband Genrich designed the displays, which were assembled by Genrikh Agranovski, and with help from survivors Rachel Margolis, Dimitrij Gelpernas, Eugenija Biber and Rachel Kostanian, the Green House on Pamenkalnio Street was established.

The force behind the Holocaust Museum was the survivors. As Rachel says, "we all burnt with a desire to establish an exhibition so the world would know, in particular the locals would know what it was, what was done and what was the result." Today it is known as the Holocaust Exhibit or Catastrophe (*Hurban*).

The Lithuanian government returned two further buildings to the Jewish community: the former Tarbut Gymnasium on Pylimo Street, which today houses the Jewish community offices, museum, archives and a Gallery of the Righteous and the former Jewish Theatre on Naugarduko Street, which today houses the Tolerance Centre. Together with the Green House Holocaust Exhibit, the three make up the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.

Material was collected for the Green House displays from three main sources, all of which Rachel and her colleagues pored over and which she absorbed as she had absorbed the library in her youth.

They studied Leyzer Ran's three volume history of centuries of Jewish life in Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania, based on the photographs he took of several thousand Jewish places and objects after the war.

They collected the memoirs and the memories of survivors "who started to glue to us," who returned to the museum daily to talk of their experiences. Also, the Lithuanian State Archives opened their treasures – documentation hidden up to 1988 – from German, Lithuanian and Polish sources, along with the remains of the Sutzkever/Kaczerginsky collection. The museum staff

copied as much as they could, fearing that – like the Jewish Museum after the war – the openness would soon end.

With this archive-based documentation, the seven rooms of the Green House were filled and the museum opened in 1991, 50 years since the German invasion.

Its character shines through in the survivors who accompany visitors. At first, Rachel Margolis did this, then she suggested that Rachel Konstanian take over.

Four thousand to 6,000 people visit the Green House every year; many are moved by Rachel's descriptions of what they are seeing. Some visitors are Lithuanian schoolchildren, some are overseas scholars, some are South African, Israeli, British and North American Jews looking for their roots and the fate of their families.

One woman came to Rachel and said: "Let us go to the forests. I have to find the place where we were shot." As well as the mass murder sites, Rachel and her staff found Jewish tombstones and lobbied for the municipalities to clear and maintain the cemeteries. This was done and monuments were put up at each mass murder site showing the numbers of people killed there.

Great Britain's Lord Janner organized funding to put markers along the highways with arrows pointing to the sites in the forests. With their research and their colleague Joseph Levinson's travels throughout Lithuania, the museum published *The Valley of Sorrows* on the mass murder sites.

Among the discoveries in the forest was a small medal, inscribed in Yiddish to Noah Shneidman to honour his 20th boxing fight, with the date of the fight, May 18, 1943 and the Vilna Ghetto symbol.

Leaving his boxing medal with his family, Shneidman escaped from the ghetto two weeks before its final liquidation, joined the partisans in the forests, and survived. Sixty-seven years later, Norman Shneidman is professor emeritus of Russian Literature at the University of Toronto. His medal has been returned to him.

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In 2000, Rachel gave a paper at the Remembering for the Future Conference in Oxford. Organized by Dr. Elisabeth Maxwell, it brought together scholars, survivors and teachers, among them Fumiko Ishioka, en route to Theresienstadt to discover the owner and family of Hana Brady and her suitcase and Judy Cohen, who came from Toronto, and was interested in women in the Shoah.

Two years later, Rachel's paper was published as the book *Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto*. It describes the areas of health care, culture, art, science, music, sport and religion that helped the Jews of the ghetto overcome and survive the physical and psychological terror.

A discovery by the museum's staff in the Vilna archives of posters of cultural and artistic events in the ghetto led to searches for where the events were held and the fate of those mentioned on the posters.

Rachel's book, *Vilna Ghetto Posters*, as well as the exhibit at the Green House, show the range of cultural activities — including a lottery to raise money for the Winter-Help

Campaign, which kept the Jews alive while their food and medicine was scarce and families and friends were being taken away and shot.

For those in the west, the Holocaust took place far away; in Europe, the locations are still there. In Lithuania, a site of the mass murder of Jews may be only a few kilometres from a local school or church.

Lithuania lost as large a percentage of its Jewish community as any country in Europe, yet having been subjected to Soviet rule for 40 years, it is that Soviet-era trauma that is fresh in their minds. They view the Jews as those who met the Soviet occupier with flowers — not unlike the Jewish perception that the Lithuanians met the German occupier with bread and salt. History is still fresh and vivid in that part of the world.

As well as being the story of Jewish death and suffering, the Holocaust is a story of resistance to evil, living in dignity, maintaining civilization amidst chaos and *überleben* — survival.

Historians such as Rachel Kostanian put a human face on the facts, making the lesson universal. She has twice returned to live in her beloved Lithuania when she was living elsewhere. A Lithuanian patriot and a Jew, she has been behind many of the museum's important works, a historian who teaches with a clear

and passionate voice that resistance to evil, to silence and to falsehood is what marks out a hero.

Twenty-five years ago, we in Canada would never have believed we would walk the cobblestone streets of Vilna and Kovno, attend Shabbat services in shul there or visit a Jewish museum. Just as the prewar *Yung Vilne* writers were the apex of their literary world, Rachel and her team are the *alte vilne*, whose research into Lithuania's Jewish history and heritage, and the teaching of it, will benefit not only the present but those generations who follow.

Nitza Spiro of the British Spiro Ark cultural centre, who took Rachel's tour of Vilna and the Green House 20 years ago, wrote: "Rachel, petite in size, has become a real giant with her personality, encyclopedic knowledge, deep emotional contact with the subject and her passion for the long story of her people in Lithuania and for education.

A proverb in Hebrew says, "*Dvarim hayotzim min halev, nichnasim el halev*" — "words that come from the depth of one's consciousness, penetrate to those who hear them."

This has been Rachel's gift to those who know her, have heard her lecture, read her books and have seen her museum. It has become her gift to us all.

Esther Goldberg has created and edited the three-volume Holocaust Memoir Digest, published by Valentine Mitchell, www.holocaustmemoirdigest.org

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