Holocaust Legacy in Post-Soviet Lithuania

People, Places and Objects

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BLOOMSBURY

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The Memory Bearer: Rachel Kostanian

From Rachel Kostanian, the woman charged for the past two decades with the stewardship of the Green House Jewish Museum, a small, dolls' house-like structure, secreted away at the top of a hill in central Vilnius, I might have expected a book, a *Kiddush* cup or a worn *Mezuzah* as her biographical object. Instead, she has elected to give me an invitation. Much like any other formal invitation in appearance, black print on white card, this particular one from the British Ambassador to Lithuania, emblazoned with the Royal crest, requests the pleasure of the company of Ms Rachel Kostanian and spouse to a reception on Wednesday 11 June 2008 at 5:30 p.m. at the British Embassy in Vilnius to celebrate the Official Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Dress: Lounge suit/Uniform. When, after hours of deliberation over the appropriateness of several possible items, Rachel finally settles on the invitation, she explains:

> I get these invitations all the time, from embassies, on a king's birthday, a queen's birthday, this day of state . . . and what does it mean? You know, at first I was embarrassed I thought, who am I, a *maidele* from Šiauliai at such a reception – then I got used to it. For me, it is not just to show up, it is to confirm my relations with the Ambassadors, that anyone can see that they respect my presence, and for me, that relates to the museum. In case of trouble, I can say 'look, I will go here or there for support'. That is the main reason: contacts, contacts, with Ambassadors and Lithuanian VIPs and that's it . . . and very good food, well sometimes not, but sometimes very good.

If things are indeed 'rich sources for grasping the affective, communicative, symbolic, and expressive aspects of human life' (Auslander 2005: 1015), then Rachel's item, an invitation in the practical sense, is also a deeper, more symbolic and layered invitation in and through the arc of those life experiences. And if the request for her attendance at an official function suggests to her that she has arrived, it is equally suggestive of the journey she has made to reach that

Figure 7.1 Rachel amidst the exhibits at the Green House museum.

juncture. Etched then, between the bold, black print, lie the intersections of memory and geography, whispering even now with stories of the great Yiddish writers she read as a child, with the Yiddish lullabies her mother would sing her to sleep, with the names of the 80 family members she lost in the Holocaust, and with all the places she has lived in, marked and been marked by en route. Her crossing from small-town Yiddish *maidele* (young girl) to upstanding society member has been stamped along the way by sites of horror and death, forced removal, escape, but also of sanctuary, and the constant making and re-making of the self in response to these conditions. Preservationist Ned Kaufman argues that in contrast to government-sanctioned buildings and monuments, other resources, valuable for their ability to convey history and nurture people's intimate and personal attachment to place, remain largely unguarded. He suggests the term 'story sites' to denote historical and cultural sites which act as 'mnemonics, bringing socially valuable stories to mind' (Kaufman 2009: 38). For the individual, he stresses, each story site supports a memory or pattern, representing an important dimension of their life. For many, these are highly personal – a particular park bench, a certain coffee shop, but there are other story sites which uphold not only personal remembrance but the collective experiences and traditions of a larger group. It is with such sites that Rachel's testimony is suffused.

It is possible, then, to view Rachel's life trajectory as a panoramic storyscape on which are plotted a series of story sites, each one inscribed with a tranche of

human experience, both hers and that of those whose lives they have equally anchored. Principal among these is the museum, and her comments about the invitation – it is not just to show up, it is to confirm my relations with the ambassadors, and for me, that relates to the museum – are reflective of her choice to live in service of a public memory site. To her, the invitation only has merit in so far as it offers an avenue of protection for *her* museum, ensuring that she can continue to safeguard the memories of *her* people. In Kaufman's terms, the Green House constitutes 'a lighthouse of historical awareness' (48), a site, however narrowly geographical, that holds within a surprising value for the larger social project of keeping history alive (50).

This 'lighthouse of historical awareness' is among the first places I visit in Vilnius. I find Rachel in a small office at the back of the building, surrounded by a cluster of women of varying age, all busied in the acts of archiving, cataloguing and typing. Her desk overflows with books and papers, her phone rings incessantly, her walls are covered with photos marking civil occasions. Here she stands beside an ambassador, there at an exhibition launch, over in the corner, at a commemorative event. Only on her desk is there any inkling of a private life: a photo of her two grandchildren. Over the course of many hours that day and several subsequent visits, she regales me, as she has countless other heritage seekers, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the matters which sit closet to her heart: the plunder of Jewish cultural treasures by the Nazis, the 'spiritual resistance' of the ghetto, the founding of Vilnius' three Jewish museums, all of which she has documented extensively in a series of museum texts. In a 2010 article in the *Canadian Jewish News*, writer Esther Goldberg describes a similar encounter with Rachel as follows: 'Rachel Kostanian has investigated each event and every place. History and geography are woven together as a doorway or hidden corner inspire a torrent of words in Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian or English. In Rachel's voice, the stones themselves cry out. Through her they come to life' (Goldberg 2010).

Indeed, listening to Rachel, it is hard to escape the sense that she, now in her eighty-first year, is a woman running against her own mortality. There are simply not enough years left in the life to accomplish the tasks she has yet to undertake: ensuring the museum its rightful place in the 'geography of Jewish life'; conducting further research; creating new exhibits; making a documentary film so that future generations can know of Jewish Lithuanian experience. When I question how she carries this immense weight of history, how, after two decades, she still manages to make the hour-long trip back and forth – two bus journeys and a gruelling walk up a steep incline – each day, without

faltering, how she stays motivated, year in, year out, she replies simply: 'My dead family and pills'.

While all the survivors I meet lay claim to a raw and painful past, there are few who have subsumed their own identities beneath the broader collective mantle of 'keeping Jewish culture alive' with the same conviction that Rachel has, few who have abandoned their personal story sites so completely in favour of a public one. Kaufman stresses that while some story sites are easily replaceable, there are others, the loss of which 'would cause an irreparable gap or disruption' (2009: 43). It is true that without Rachel the Green House would not have come into being: it is she and her troupe of volunteers who pored over volumes of material gathered from across the globe; her husband who constructed the exhibits; she who personally conducts the majority of the 6,000 museum tours each year; her knowledge of and passion for her subject which brings it to life for her visitors. Yet, it is equally true that without the museum Rachel herself might not exist, or might not know how to exist. By her own admission: 'The work at the museum is my life and very dear to me'. That decision – to make it her life's work to perpetuate the museum as a site of memory to the 'murdered Jews of Ponar' – can perhaps be linked to the prevalence of communal, as opposed to personal sites, with which her own narrative is populated from a very young age. It is into these sites that her invitation beckons.

Notwithstanding the prominence of communal sites along her path, Rachel's story starts, as most of ours do, in a highly personalized space: a home in the *shtetl* of Šiauliai, where a 10-year-old girl is hiding behind the curtains to surprise her parents, Yosif Zivelchinski, a local Chief Justice and Bluma Daning-Zivelchinski, a Yiddish teacher, when they return from work. The date is the 22 June 1941. In *Camera Lucida,* literary theorist Roland Barthes describes the process of reading an image, in his case, a photograph of his mother taken when she was five in a Winter Garden which he came upon while caring for her in her last days. There in that image he found all the possible predicates from which his mother's being had been constituted: 'the Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of the mother-as-child, the impossible science of the unique being' locked into a single frame (2000: 71). I too have an image of Rachel, all that she is and may become, stamped onto that fateful moment before she steps out from behind the curtain of time into a living room of death, from which she would never quite extract herself. As it was, when she jumped out to startle her parents, the worried expressions on their faces alerted her to the fact that something was terribly wrong. The following morning her father announced that they would be leaving: 'not for long, maybe one week, because the Russian army is very

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close and will soon be in Berlin, so you don't have to take anything, just a small suitcase and close the doors'. 'And this is what we did', she says. 'I remember my mother standing by the door, locking it and handing the keys to my father, and he said, "No, you better take them." We left without almost anything, only small suitcases, very small'.

And what were they leaving behind? By the time war broke out in 1941, Šiauliai hosted the third largest Jewish community in Lithuania, numbering over 8,000, many of whom were employed in Jewish shoe, linen, furniture and chocolate factories. There were 15 synagogues, a *Yeshiva* and both traditional and non-traditional Jewish schools. Community members, including Rachel's parents, were active in Jewish cultural life and civic affairs. There was even a Jewish vice-mayor.[1]

Rachel attended the *folk shul* (elementary school), and her earliest recollections are fond ones, populated by classrooms of happy children and dedicated teachers, like her parents, who 'loved all the children, as their own'. Although many of the families were poor, she explains, 'the teachers always made a collection to provide the neediest among them with free lunches, never leaving anyone out'. This idyllic scene, however, was soon to change. The fate that would have surely awaited Rachel and her family had they stayed is depicted in the diaries of renowned Jewish educator and former Šiauliai resident, Eliezer Yerushalmi.[2] They describe in detail the events of November 1943, which have since come to be known as the *Kinderaktion* or children's action. Unlike the ghettos of Kovno and Vilna, which were taken by complete surprise, Jews in Šiauliai had the benefit of advance warning, having been alerted through the summer and autumn months of 1943 of the imminence of such an action. In anticipation, parents sought to smuggle their children out, in some instances, drugging them and placing them in sacks or rubbish bins that were routinely removed from the ghetto. Others tried to bribe non-Jewish Lithuanians to hide their offspring, and some even took to hurling their babies over the ghetto fences in the hopes that Lithuanians on the other side would rescue them. On 4 November, large empty trucks crept through the ghettos, loudspeakers booming orders for all children to be placed aboard. These orders alternated with the ear-splitting sounds of music to drown out the children's desperate screams. Mothers clutching onto their toddlers were driven off with heavy blows. Babies were seized by their limbs, their heads smashed against stone walls or the fenders of waiting trucks, dogs were set loose to sniff out hidden children who when discovered were torn to pieces. Walls were pulled apart, floors ripped up, until the Germans were satisfied that every last child had been accounted for. Thereafter, Lithuanian squads trawled the ghetto

fences on the lookout for Jews who might have escaped. At times their brutality was so fierce that Jews, in desperation, turned to the Germans for mercy. In all, only a few children survived the *Kinderaktion*. And even those who did were handed over to the Nazis or killed by their guardians when their parents could no longer pay their keep[3] (Greenbaum 1995: 333).

An eyewitness account of the first round-ups in 1941 by forester Pranus Bragdonas, recorded after the Soviets exhumed the massacre pits in the Gubernija Forest near Šiauliai in 1944, provides further evidence not only of the cruelty of Nazi commanders, but also of the involvement of local Lithuanian collaborators.

> On 7 to 15 September 1941, Jewish people – men, women and children – were shot. They were brought from Šiauliai. The perpetrators were Lithuanian partisans with submachine guns, they were almost always drunk. When everyone had left, the local people saw pools of blood at the pits and other signs. Even today one can find trunks of trees marked with bullets. . . . We uncovered parts of the pits . . . the bodies were thrown in without any order. Some lay crossways, others lengthways, some sitting, others upside down, men women and children. All are in light clothes, mostly underwear, some have shoes. Most were shot in the head. Heads of two children of some ten years of age were completely smashed. In the third pit a woman's body is found. Her legs are bound with wire and her mouth is stuffed with a woollen cloth. Part of her head is smashed with some hard item. It can be that this woman was raped and then murdered and thrown on top of the pit . . . on the surface of this pit is a thick book with Jewish characters was found. It was in quite good condition. All items found were left with the bodies.[4]

As it turns out, Rachel was saved on several counts. By fleeing Šiauliai that June morning, her family was spared internment in the ghetto, she escaped the eventual *Kinderaktion*, and she had also inadvertently been spared the fate of most of her classmates who, 2 days earlier, had found themselves defenceless as the first bombing assault hit Palanga, a seaside resort close to the German border.[5] She had been scheduled to attend the annual Pioneer summer camp with her friends, but in a moment of rare prescience, her parents had decided to keep her home. This last-minute change of plan, unquestionably, saved her life. After the initial assault, all local Jews alongside Jewish children attending the camp, were taken to the nearby bus station. Males aged 13 and above were marched to a grove on the outskirts of town, forced to dig a ditch and then thrown in. Women and children were incarcerated in the local synagogue and held there in inhumane conditions, then taken to the Kunigiskiai forest and murdered.[6]

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Although Rachel's family managed to evade the ghetto and death at the pits, they did not emerge unscathed. On the morning of 23 June, they made their way hurriedly from their home to a minibus waiting to evacuate Šiauliai VIPs. Rachel's father, as Chief Justice, was counted among them. There were four other families, Rachel recalls, all Lithuanian. With the bombs raining down, they travelled across an open field towards the railway station where the woman and children were placed on a train bound for Russia. The men planned to return to Šiauliai to help others. 'But', says Rachel, 'my father was the only one who actually did go back. He was a beacon, a disciplined man; the others saved themselves and escaped to Russia'. Before he left he handed his passport photo to his wife 'for safekeeping'. Three days later, Rachel explains, 'my father was following a fleeing bus with women and children aboard. It was attacked by parachuters, and they descended and asked, "What have we here?" and when they were told, they said, "*Juden* and Communists." My father was the only Jew and the only Communist, two things in one person, and so they shot him. I know this from a colleague because her mother and brother were also on that bus'.

While her father faced down his end on a dark road on the outskirts of town, Rachel and her mother rumbled through the Russian interior and would learn only much later of his demise. They travelled for several days, mostly without food, apart from a 'cup of boiled water soup' made available to them at each stop en route. Rachel and her mother Bluma were the very last passengers to alight in Gorky, which still had a sizeable Jewish community, among them the only two cousins of some 80 members of the combined Zevelchinki-Danzig families to have survived. War-time privations, however, proved intractable and Bluma's health deteriorated, notwithstanding copious amounts of fish oil with which she and Rachel were plied by the Russian soldiers. It was decided that Rachel should be sent to a *Kinderhome* in the Ural mountains while her mother recuperated, one of several such orphanages established for children who had fled the Pioneer camps or whose parents had already perished. This makeshift orphanage in Debesy (meaning 'sky') was to become Rachel's habitat for the next 3 years and as such represents the first of her major story sites.

There, under the guidance of a Jewish couple, Rachel and her peers 'forgot that we were hungry, because we were singing and dancing, and performing, and we were busy with all those things to get away from the sorrow that we had no parents and in some ways, they (the couple) substituted for our parents and it was wonderful'. However warm her memories, hunger remained a constant. 'Frozen milk', she recalls, was 'the most glorious luxury. They would take a plate and put lime in it and get it to frost over and then it would become like an

ice milk and it was so beautiful, so attractive, like ice cream for us. So we were dreaming about it and waiting for someone to get some money from relatives to go to the market to buy it and we licked it for hours, licked and licked and licked. I remember the cold tongue [laughs]'.

In summer months, the *kinder* (children) roamed the fields, hunting for grasses, leaves, seeds and bark to eat, apart from which their main diet consisted of oats – two or three spoonfuls each for breakfast with butter, for lunch potato oats and for dinner kasha. When winter hit, with temperatures dipping below zero, the daily chore of chopping wood to heat their small stoves was rendered virtually impossible, a situation compounded by the fact that they only had one pair of leather shoes between them, which they took in turns to wear. The scenes Rachel describes are echoed over and over in the 2006 film depicting life at the home, *Children From The Sky* by Lithuanian director Natalija Ju, in which several former teachers and residents of Debesy house recount their experiences. A Lithuanian tutor at the school recalls: 'When the children arrived they were all hungry; we had nothing to eat, but we treated them as if they were our own babies'. A former resident remembers 'a prize we received for collecting the most ashes, an American toothpaste, but nobody had a toothbrush. One child came and asked to lick it, and another did the same, that way we ate up the whole tube in one day' (Ju 2006).

Physical deprivation was not their only concern. The daughter of the former headmistress recounts: 'Mother told me that they were writing letters but there was no place to send them. They lived there for 3 years most without knowing if their parents were alive or not. Some became orphans there. They needed to survive all that' (Ju 2006). Rachel was among the lucky ones. She and her mother corresponded throughout her stay and Bluma even managed to visit once. 'Can you imagine', says Rachel, 'what an event it was in the *Kinderhome* where all kids are without parents and all of a sudden they find out that a mother is coming. And the whole *Kinderhome*, more than 200 children, came out in the alleys and everyone was touching her and saying, mother, mother, mother . . .' Given the testimony of Marite Raseleikaite, another former resident, it is not hard to envision such a scene. 'Everything', she says, 'was bearable except for missing our parents. Until now I still have such a strong desire to sit on my mother's knee' (Ju 2006).

It is not only in the descriptions of such inner longings that their accounts coalesce. It is also in the evocation of the capacity to feel and find beauty even in the most harrowing circumstances. Although for a small girl, trudging through the snow, cutting branches, piling them up and lugging them back was no easy

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task, what Rachel recalls most vividly of this experience is the 'beauty of the forest, of the Urals'. 'I remember that it struck me', she says, 'and nobody taught me to see this beauty, at least not in snow, but it was a blue sky and the pine trees, and the eagle trees, and the fir trees, stretching up to the skies, and so green and the white snow in big specks laying on them, and it was so beautiful that though the work was not easy, but I looked around me at this beauty . . . and this is my memory of them'. Raseleikaite also marvels at the breathtaking beauty of the physical landscape, recalling: 'the water of the river Cepca was almost transparent, the shores and the mountains of Baigureoz were so beautiful, the winter in Debesy was very deep. The beautiful wooden houses, the gates with little roofs on them. We didn't have anything like that in Lithuania' (Ju 2006).

When I ask Rachel what in her allowed her to respond so viscerally to this natural beauty, even in such harrowing circumstances, she tells me: 'Culture, culture, the genes that didn't let us become wild, to steal, to scold, to have doubt and suspicion between us. The spirit was inside me because I was brought up with values, that was in our family, in our books, in pictures, in stories, in Jewish stories'. It is this spirit to which Yaffa Eliach refers when she suggests that the tales she gathered for her collection are not merely personal stories but rather assume the dimensions of moral and social reflections and commentary (1999: xix). This spirit is evoked in Elie Wiesel's literary deconstruction of the sacrifice of Isaac, the first survivor story. Terrifying in content, this tale, he suggests, has emerged as a source of consolation to those, who in retelling it, make it part of their own experience. It is a story that 'contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every passion, every major theme and obsession in Judaism', he says, 'can be traced back to this story of man's anguish when he finds himself face to face with God' (1976: 69). And it is a glimpse of this spirit that we catch when psychiatrist Viktor Frankl describes how he entered Auschwitz with the manuscript of his first book, his most prized possession which represented decades of painstaking work, hidden in the pocket of his overcoat. At the gates, he was forced to surrender his clothes and in return inherited 'the worn out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber'. Instead of the many pages of his manuscript, there in the pocket of the newly acquired coat he found one single page torn from a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer: *Shema Yisroel.* How, he asks, might I have interpreted such a coincidence? His answer: 'As a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper' (2004: 119). For Frankl, living his thoughts meant finding meaning by experiencing something 'such as goodness, truth and beauty – by experiencing nature and culture or by

experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness – by loving him' (134). Surely this is how Rachel and her peers in Debesy came through: by finding beauty in their surroundings, by expressing their love and respect for each other, by refusing to become undone by the conditions of their forced separation from parents and family and their equally forced communion with strangers.

Thus, it was a deeply ingrained sense of Jewishness that Rachel carried with her to a small, snow-covered village embedded in the Ural Mountains whose very name invoked the heavens. Onto that foundational base were poured the kind of life-lessons that endure lifetimes. As one former resident explains: 'I learned there everything, work, friendship, endurance, although it would have been better to learn all that in other conditions . . .' Another remarks: 'Children learned how to live during that first rough winter' (Ju 2006). That Debesy features so prominently in their life narratives, that it is so integral to their identify formation, implies that it does indeed, in Kaufman's terms, constitute a site, wherein 'stories of history, tradition and shared memory' are held (Kaufman 2009: 39).

Today, the orphanage is a small village library with one room dedicated to a museum of the former school, presided over by a former tutor, into which very few visitors venture. It is not a landmark in the traditional sense. There are no banners or plaques to announce its presence, no formal or public acknowledgements of its past. Rather, it serves as an almost invisible repository for the idiosyncratic memories of a specific group of people. In one scene from the Ju film, several former residents, including Rachel, gather in the summer of 2006 at a park bench in central Vilnius. They hug and laugh as they pore over photos from Debesy in a collective invocation which would seem to echo what Greenspan terms – 'a gathering of voices'. In elucidating his concept, Greenspan, following Holocaust historian Terrence Des Pres, maintains that for survivors, 'their past is collective rather than personal, a past identical for everyone who came through the common catastrophe. Memory and selfhood are rooted, often traumatically, in events which define the individual not as an individual but as a participant in, and the embodiment of a decisive historical experience' (1998: 59). Graham Dawson, who has addressed issues of trauma and memory in relation to Northern Ireland, likewise suggests that for members of besieged communities, shared political and cultural narratives supply the psychic resources of strength and resilience, providing a collective means to combat the disintegration and withdrawal of self that so often marks the presence of the traumatic (2007: 76). Using the metaphor of a stream to illustrate this withdrawal, one can consider

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that for the person in deep shock, 'consciousness becomes a flood, drowning the island of the self, collapsing its banks into it.' The surrounding world engulfs the inner world. 'That world of alterity, with which one had worked out a *modus vivendi*, suddenly becomes a threat, an enemy, a contagion. One is petrified and powerless before it'. As a result, Jackson asserts, one 'falls into inwardness' (2006: 71). The gathering of voices mitigates against such a fall. The Debesy home thus provided the forum wherein individual lives, stories and experiences dissolved one into another. As Rachel recalls:

> We loved each other. . . . We had wounds because of hunger, scratches and sores all over us, and we had no soap so we were up, rubbing each other, the backs, with kerosene and slept, two to a bed, one head here, legs there, these children they became my brothers and sisters. . . . We communicated day and night about the attack on Palanga, most of my classmates didn't survive but those who did would tell me how the war had started, how they were running into the woods, how they were on the bus, or the railroad, how they were hungry, how it took them a whole month to reach the *kinderhome* . . . their stories became my stories.

Notwithstanding the inevitability of this kind of merged memory, we must also be cognizant of the fact, Greenspan argues, that while for Holocaust survivors memory and selfhood are rooted in the event itself, they are also rooted elsewhere. When we listen to their words, he stresses, we hear more than voices from Auschwitz or Treblinka, Vilna or Kovno, we also hear the 'distinctive accents of Bialystock, Budapest and Lvov. Within and around memories of collective destruction are fully personal memories of one who had been a schoolgirl in the Carpathians, and of another was once a factory worker in Galicia, who dreamed and still dreamed of planting trees in Palestine'. As such, survivors' voices are themselves 'gatherings' (1998: 60). If then while at Debesy, the child self became submerged under the weight of shared experience, the end of the war marked not only a departure from the home itself but also from collectivity and, thus, a return to individuality. Here their stories begin to diverge.

For most of the *kinder* liberation triggered a new set of problems. One recalls how they gathered at the station and looked out at the carriages, wondering 'whether to go East or West', realizing that they had 'no one, not one single person to rely on' (Ju 2006). 'The Lithuanian children', Rachel says now, 'were greeted by parents. They were hugged and they were kissed by parents, but I came to understand from what I heard later from others that we as Jews were

not equal to the Lithuanians, because they were met, and we were not met by anybody. I was the lucky one'. Rachel, alone among her peers, 'stepped down' in Gorky where Bluma was standing on the platform to greet her.

At summer's end, she and Bluma travelled to Vilnius where, after several menial jobs, Bluma became director of a library on Kareviius Street, marking the emergence of Rachel's second story site. There, in a small room in the corridor, located beside the main reading hall, Rachel and Bluma set up their new home. 'One door was to our room', Rachel recalls, 'and the other was to the main reading hall. So very often people would open our door [laughs] and I would say, "No, next door is the library." But on the other hand, we had the library, when it was closed, all to ourselves'.

The Argentine author Alberto Manguel evokes the power of the library as rescue, as solace, as liberation in his beautifully considered series of essays, *The Library at Night*. Here he invokes the capacity of the book to summon what Roman philosopher Seneca referred to as *euthymia*, a state of 'well-being of the soul' (2006: 188). And here, ultimately, he calls up the image of the 'library as home' (306). For the 13-year-old girl who arrived in a city 'blasted and fired', where returning Jews combed the streets and railway stations day and night searching for lost family members, where houses, buildings, entire blocks, looted by Germans now stood abandoned, empty, where images of bloodshed, carnage and despair abounded, for this girl, the library indeed loomed as a space of refuge even beyond Manguel's wide-ranging portrayal. For her, the bricks and mortar library *was* home; she not only lived *in* the library, but also *with* the library, for it was there that the greatest writers in the world became accessible, enriched her mind and formed her (Goldberg 2010). Yet, just as with Debesy, her memories are mixed; she describes with great mirth how she and her mother hung out their washing between the bookshelves, how for birthdays they laid out food on the reading tables and danced between the aisles. But she also remembers the physical strain of lugging crates of coal and wood up the long, narrow staircases to heat the stoves. And yet, just as in Debesy, despite physical hardship, in the library, she discovered community. Following sociologist Robert N. Bellah, Kaufman stresses that 'people growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, they also participate in the practices of commitment – ritual, aesthetic, ethical – which define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive' (2009: 51). Rachel's depictions of the way of life at the library certainly suggest such practices of commitment. She and Bluma were eventually offered a larger room in a 'common flat', which they shared with five

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other Jewish families, one room for each family, one kitchen with five stoves. As she describes it:

> Bluma happened to be the elder there and was so admired by everyone that she was like the Rebetzon (Rabbi's wife), and all the young couples would come and say, 'Bluma, what should I do?' and Bluma had the *gizorg* (the last word), so there were no cries, no quarrels. It was calm and we loved everyone. I grew up under their watch; they had to approve all my young friends, somebody would come to visit, and all the residents of the flat, all five, would come to the doorway because our room was the last one, so anybody coming to me had to pass the whole corridor and every inhabitant would look and give their verdict: good or bad. The children became my brothers and sisters and we were very much like relatives, in particular for us, because we had no more family.

For the refugee, Hannah Arendt suggests, the rupture of private life is acutely felt, prompting an urge to rebuild (1994: 110). The manner of circumstantial bonding, the contrivance of family ties that Rachel and her mother enacted with their fellow residents of the library is commonplace, Arendt suggests, among survivors who, in finding themselves adrift, gravitate towards the presence of others who have seen and heard what they have seen and heard, for it is their very presence 'that assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves' (1958: 50).

That Rachel found herself 'at home' in a library becomes ever more poignant in the light of the fate of the vast canon of Jewish writings during the war years. It also likely contributed, decades later, to her decision to dedicate her life to the guardianship of that canon. Hitler's assault on the Jews was simultaneously a war against Yiddish, the main repository of its modern culture (Wisse 2000: 234). That the Nazi attempt to eradicate that culture in Vilna did not succeed is due, Rachel says, to the valiant acts of a few men. The heroes in her story are not, as in the case of Chasia and Fania, the fighters and the partisan leaders or, as in the case of Berl, the rabbis and the soldiers but instead the Yiddish writers – Aleichem, Bialik, I. L. Peretz, Der Nister – and the 'retrievers' – Kruk, Sutzkever, Kaczerginski[7] (themselves writers and poets) – who salvaged their literary inheritance from the ashes. For the Jews caught up in Hitler's net, language assumed an existential urgency (Wisse 2000: 23), the word itself becoming not so much a refuge, a realm into which they could flee to escape death and despair, but rather one in which they might seek a life (Patterson 1999: 39).

Growing up listening to her mother read Sholem Aleichem's tales of impoverished, imperilled *shtetls* and of his most famous character, Tevye, the nomadic

milkman and the process of perpetual adaptation to which he was subjected to preserve the Jewish way of life (Kushner 2009: 65), Rachel began to identify with what was meant by the term 'rootless Jew'. After the war, she says: 'This is what I understood. I have no roots because everyone has been killed. Everything I had is gone'. And it was perhaps because her losses, in human terms, were so monumental, that her cultural inheritance – the books, the scrolls, the documents and manuscripts, the menorahs and rituals objects – would come to hold such meaning for her. Of the men to whom she attributes their rescue – Sutzkever, Kaczerginski, Kruk – she says now:

> When the Nazis came they destroyed anything Jewish. And those Jews who by some miracle survived, they tried to save the remnants of our Jewish cultural heritage, they put up a fight for the Jewish heritage. . . . After the war they found some *malinas* with pieces of our heritage, and they tried to reopen the Jewish museum which was a very difficult task, but thanks to the efforts of Sutzkever, Kaczerginksi and some others . . . thanks to them that the museum was opened.

Rachel's life path would eventually follow theirs and to them she would owe an intellectual as well as a practical debt for she would not only inherit the treasures they salvaged but also the role of protecting them. She, like they, would become a steward of a rare and precious cargo, that of Jewish memory, Jewish history, Jewish language and Jewish culture. And just as they had before her, she would come to seek a home, not so much in buildings or in the people who occupied them, but in words, in images and in objects. Thus, the invitation she hands me is also an invitation into their world.

Listening to her recount the exploits of the men who would become known as the 'Paper Brigade', I am struck, viscerally, by the aura of doom that must have descended over the ghetto when, on 24 June 1942, a representative of the Special Detail of the Reich – Administrator Alfred Rosenberg – arrived in Vilna to round up the city's Judaica collections and arrange for their shipment to Germany. There they were to form part of the newly established Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question,[8] ostensibly *Judenforschung ohne Juden* or 'Jewish studies without Jews' (Fishman 2009: 3). Given the volume of rare Jewish books in Vilna, the Rosenberg Squad organized a Special Detail of Jewish workers to aid with the cataloguing and shipment of items.[9] These men were set up in a makeshift depot in the reading hall of YIVO, to which collections from Vilna, Kovno and neighbouring towns were transported for processing (Fishman 1996: 4).

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At the time, the poet Avraham Sutzkever could not help but note the parallels between operations of the Gestapo and those of the Rosenberg Squad. Just as the former raided houses in search of Jews in hiding, the latter conducted aggressive searches for Jewish books. Once seized, they, like the people who had owned them, were subjected to a process of *selektsia* – between life and death, with those deemed of value transferred to Frankfurt, the rest shipped to a nearby paper mill for recycling (6). In elucidating the term *precarium*, which in its original legal context describes 'the deposit of items slated to be returned to at a later date', Bozena Shallcross invokes another meaning, that of 'precariousness or a shaky unstable status' (2012: 6). This, she asserts, accurately reflects the Holocaust text's wandering, threatened existence, 'the way it changed hands and places in diverse chance-driven scenarios' (6). The precariousness, by which texts, as well as their owners, oscillated between existence and obliteration, was manifest in Vilna. Manuscripts with elaborate or impressive covers were saved; those which were poorly bound, regardless of their content, were consigned to death. Of his assignment, Herman Kruk wrote in his diary: 'Kalmanovitch and I don't know whether we are gravediggers or saviours. If we manage to keep these treasures in Vilna, it may be to our great merit. But if the library will be sent out, we will have had a hand in it'. Naively he also noted in the same entry: 'Our new taskmasters are intellectuals, and it seems they are people we can get along with' (2002: 212). Kruk and his crew, however, soon recognized that clandestine strategies were required to ensure that some of 'our Jewish books will gradually escape from here and meanwhile find shelter in a safe place' (214). To this end, at the close of each work day they stuffed materials inside their clothing to prevent detection by the guards when re-entering the ghettos gates at night. Via the Paper Brigade, or *di papir-brigade* as they were known, thousands of books and tens of thousands of documents made their way back into the Vilna Ghetto. Of this endeavour, the famed poet Smerke Kaczerginski would later remark, 'Jews looked at us as if we were lunatics. *They* were smuggling foodstuffs into the ghetto in their clothing and boots, and *we* were smuggling books, pieces of paper, occasionally a *Sefer Torah* or *Mezuzahs*' (Fishman 1996: 8). Marek Web, one-time Chief Archivist at YIVO, New York, which eventually housed the salvaged materials, would, years later, describe the retrievals of the Paper Brigade as acts of resistance, stating:

> Precisely because they were doomed, in the same way that their creators, the people are doomed . . . saving, rescuing documents should be viewed as an act of resistance . . . and from another perspective, both during the war and after the war, was that in those papers there is incorporated the world, the people,

> their culture as it existed before the Holocaust and rescuing those papers was like rescuing pieces, mementos, documents of that world – Evidence. Perhaps the only evidence that would exist. So here we have this important moment that was probably on the minds of the members of the Paper Brigade that when they rescued things that may look to you not so important, perhaps trifling or even humorous, to future generations this will be evidence of a life that was extinguished.[10]

Today, when Rachel speaks of those who 'put up a fight for the Jewish heritage, to hide it, to have it, to grab it, to take it, to take it, to hide it, to save it', her words tumble over each other, as if she, in the recounting, is rushing, even now, to salvage these remnants from their graves.

Once the materials were inside the ghetto, the problem remained of what to do with them. Sutzkever, who personally salvaged manuscripts by Tolstoy, Gorky, Aleichem and Bialik and original artwork by Chagall, Repin and Antokolsky (Fishman 1996: 8), divided his materials among ten *malinas* including the walls and floors of his own apartment, a bunker constructed by a young engineer to hide his paralysed mother, and eventually the attic of the YIVO building itself. Despite these efforts, shipments to the paper mills accelerated. In what would prove one of his last diary entries, Kalmanovitch recorded: 'Our work is reaching its conclusion. Thousands of books are being dumped in the trash and liquidated. Whatever part we can rescue will be saved with God's help. We will find it when we return as free human beings' (10). For Kalmanovitch and Kruk, the option to return as free human beings did not materialize. Both perished in an Estonian labour camp. Sutzkever and Kaczerginski, however, had joined the partisans and made it back to Vilna in June 1944.[11] While others set about finding family members and retrieving children who had been left with non-Jewish Lithuanians, they had a different agenda – that of digging up the large repository of Jewish books, documents and treasures that they had hidden.

The prognosis for such a task was bleak. The YIVO building had been reduced to rubble, its attic burned beyond recognition. A hiding place inside the Jewish library had been discovered days before liberation and all of its contents incinerated in the courtyard. The underground bunker, however, had remained intact, as had countless other *malinas*. On 26 July 1944, just 13 days after liberation, Suztkever and Kaczerginski established the Museum of Jewish Art and Culture in Vilna. Describing what followed, Rachel recounts:

> People came volunteering to gather the materials from the *malinas* and *schlep* them . . . they were *schlepping* from the attics and cellars, the bunkers and the

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> Gestapo building, and they had no place to *schlep* it to, so they went to the authorities and . . . the only place that was given was the former prison and a room in the ghetto library, so here our artefacts in the premises of the ghetto prison were going to die for a second time, because the walls were so wet. It was damp and wet and the water was running from the walls.

These walls, Rachel writes, 'were also weeping with hundreds of inscriptions: Paneriai, Remember us, Revenge for us, the final words of the perished: chiselled, etched, scratched and burned into the walls. And names, names and more names. A memorial to Paneriai. The walls themselves were calling out, screaming for justice' (2006: 271). Viewing these remnants of Jewish thought and creativity, scattered across the floor and piled ceiling high – the thousands of torn and damaged documents and books – the cultural archivist Leizar Ran lamented over the 'paper mountains of horror and grief' (Kostanian 1996: 10). Nonetheless, Rachel notes, they did manage to rescue paintings, books and sculptures by I. L. Peretz, Abraham Mapu, the diaries of Dr Theodor Herzl, periodicals, menorahs, ritual objects from Ansky's first Jewish museum, children's ghetto textbooks, photographs and programmes from the Vilna Ghetto theatre troupe, reports by Dr Alfred Rosenberg, 'yellow *scheins*', worker permits, diaries, drawings, partisan proclamations and even plastic models of the Vilna Ghetto (Kostanian 1996: 8). And there in the former prison building, in eight narrow and humid rooms and three warehouses in the courtyard,[12] where Jewish inmates had been tortured by the Nazis, the museum staff, consisting of six unpaid volunteers including former partisan leader Abba Kovner and Sutzkever as Director, began the lengthy salvaging process.

Initial euphoria surrounding the museum launch was short-lived. Despite early promises, the Lithuanian Soviet authorities offered little support to the venture. Sensing that Soviet Vilnius, as it had been renamed, might not prove the safest haven for Jewish treasures, in September 1944 Sutzkever managed to despatch a package of materials to YIVO, newly headquartered in New York. Kaczerginski, a Communist sympathizer before the war, travelled to Moscow shortly thereafter to appeal to the Central Committee of the Communist Party about the 'obstructionist and hostile attitude of the Lithuanian authorities towards the museum'. He left assured by the 'sympathetic hearing' he had received, only to discover on his return to Vilna that the Trash Administration (*soyuzutil*) had just shipped 30 tons of YIVO materials to the paper mills (Fishman 1996: 13). When, in the ensuing months, KGB officials began conducting surprise raids on the museum and censoring workers' activities, Kaczerginski realized, 'that we,

the group of museum archivists . . . must save our treasures again and get them out of here. Otherwise they will perish. In the best of cases, they will survive but never again see the light of day in the Jewish world' (Fishman 1996: 13). One by one the museum archivists emigrated, smuggling out whatever they could of the 25,000 Hebrew and Yiddish books, 10,000 volumes of Judaica, 600 sacks of documentary materials from YIVO and the ghettos of Vilna and Kovno (14). By mid-1946, both Kaczerginski and Sutzkever were in Poland, surrounded by mounds of materials which they frantically shipped to safety in New York. As suspected, the fate of the vast tranche left behind was unfortunate. In 1948, word spread through the west that the Jewish Museum had been ransacked by the KGB, its holdings dispersed among various Soviet institutions (14). As Rachel writes: 'After four years, the museum was closed. Anything that had artistic value went to the museums of art, such as pictures, sculptures, ritual objects went to the museum of the artisan, printed materials to the revolutionary museum and the books to the *Bikher Palate* (Book Palace). This is how the Soviet Authorities, in their campaign against Cosmopolitanism and Zionism liquidated the Jewish museum, scattering its collections among other institutions and archives' (Kostanian 1996: 10). The official liquidation order, issued by the Ministers of the Soviet Republic of Lithuania, instructed that all collections of the Jewish museum should be transferred to the Vilnius regional museum; artefacts of historical-revolutionary value were to be sent to the State Historical Revolution museum in Vilnius and those of artistic value to the Directorate of Art Affairs. Books from the Jewish Museum were to be transferred to the Book Palace of the Soviet Republic of Lithuania with the remaining inventory going to the Vilnius Librarian Technicum.[13]

The books and scrolls that found their way to the Book Palace would have been consigned to oblivion in a damp cellar or pulped had it not been for another of Rachel's heroes: its Lithuanian Director, Dr Antanas Ulpis. Discreetly disregarding his superiors who had ordered him to destroy all materials of Jewish origin, he began the painstaking process of cataloguing and safeguarding thousands of Jewish books in a concealed area, a fact that only came to light after his retirement. Rachel recounts the story of a young Jewish musician who, one day while out taking a stroll, happened upon a truck loaded with what, at first glance, looked like Torah scrolls. 'He stopped the lorries', she explains, 'and saw that these were Torahs, and scrolls and other Jewish books, and he said, "Where are you going?" and they said, "to the paper factory." And he asked them to wait for a while and somehow managed to get permission for them to be returned, for Dr Ulpis and his staff to take them back, which they did'. At a

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2002 ceremony in Vilnius marking the return of thirty Torah scrolls from the Lithuanian government to the Jewish Community, Ulpis' widow described the same incident as follows:

> In 1945 the Soviet army took books to the Vilnius outskirts. It was an unimaginably huge pile. They tried to burn them but it was raining, and this natural element helped fight the fire. It was just smoke. Antanas took a truck and started to gather what he could. He took them back to a church because the Lithuanian Bishop gave him the key and said, 'Put it here.' Nobody else took an interest in books. They were only talking about disappearing persons. (Elick 2002)

At the ceremony Ulpis' son Danius vividly recalled how his father had shown him stacks of Torah scrolls and Jewish books in the church annex. 'These books', he said, 'were thrown out of libraries and synagogues all over the country. People were afraid to keep them, and he was taking everything he could find. And there weren't many people helping him because this was very dangerous' (Elick 2002). It was most likely this very cache that Allan Nadler (one-time director of research at YIVO) surveyed during his visit to Vilnius to repatriate libraries, archives and Torah scrolls plundered and confiscated by the Nazis and later held by Soviet authorities. Describing the experience, he says:

> I was looking at these books and I was blown away as a bibliophile. I started opening books that were lying literally on the ground and looking at the title pages, and seeing the stamps of those who had owned them, rabbis, scholars . . . some of the great figures of the yeshivas before the Holocaust, and I was looking at these books owned by great men lying on the floor for fifty years . . . but then I had a personal moment . . . I got on a footstool, and literally, blindly reached to the very top of a pole and took down a small text. On the cover was this stamp of the Strashun Library, so it very clearly came from that collection and I opened it up and sure enough it was a first edition of a book called *Keter – The Crown of Torah* – which is the book I'd based my doctoral research on . . . and I was literally hysterical, I'm not a mystic but that's as close as I've come to a mystical experience. . . . It was the first time in my life I'd ever laid eyes on a first edition of *Keter*. . . . The next morning I went to synagogue with my *Tallis* and *Tefillin* to pray and I actually felt that, in Vilna, there was something to pray for, to pray about, which I hadn't felt in years.[14]

Ulpis' private cache, of which *Keter* was surely a part, remained in the inner recesses of the Lithuanian National Book Chamber for over 40 years. During

that time, Jewish culture – books, language, ritual – disappeared under a dense Soviet fog. Returning to his hometown, Vilna, after years in forced exile, the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade spoke evocatively of this glaring erosion of Jewish culture:

> The Jewish town was not even a museum or a graveyard but a ghost, a restless memory without a place to call home, a spirit without a body. I have roamed through the seven little alleyways that made up the ghetto . . . orphaned they cast a spell upon me; their emptiness hovers in my brain, they attached themselves to me like seven chains of stone. . . . Yet I have no desire to free myself of them. I want them to carve themselves still deeper into my body, my flesh. . . . I want to become a ruin. (1986: 335)

In her essay, 'Beyond Words', Leora Auslander argues that in France, even those who had lost only their possessions (and not their lives) under the Vichy regime felt betrayed by the French state, as by failing to protect the property of its inhabitants, the state had equally failed to protect their dignity and their humanity (2005: 1017). In Vilnius, with Jewish writings censored, Jewish sites and monuments cemented over or replaced by heroic Soviet figures, with Jewish cemeteries, the only 'evidential reminder of a centuries-long history and geography' (Briedis 2009: 232), destroyed, what of the habits of place? With no protection for their 'story sites', how to unearth and honour the topography of hidden experience, where to enact and sustain their memories?

For Rachel, as for many others, the period from liberation in 1944 to independence in the early 1990s was marked by silence, even among family and peers. As she recounts:

> We never talked about the Holocaust. Never. Maybe the parents who survived didn't want to traumatize us. I didn't know the word Holocaust. I didn't read books about it, it was not allowed. There was an Iron Curtain established by the Soviet Rule; they didn't let in any information about Jews or Jewish suffering. Stalin didn't want to emphasize about Jews, or highlight Jewish suffering . . . we knew our families are gone, we knew we had no relatives, they perished in the war. It was a war, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, it was a big war, many perished, many people were killed, among them our families . . . that was it . . . probably I was stupid. I think so.

Hannah Arendt describes her own refugee experience in similar terms: 'Even among ourselves', she wrote, 'we don't speak about the past. Instead we have found our way of mastering an uncertain future. Since everybody plans and wishes and hopes so do we' (1994: 111). Into that silence fell the vast canon

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of Jewish writings and beliefs, and perhaps most significantly, Jewish oral traditions. It is language that binds people to place, through language that places are imaginatively constituted in ways that carry implications for 'who we are' (Dixon and Durrheim 2000: 27). Who then could Rachel and her peers become in an atmosphere where 'it was impossible to be Jewish; you were denied your national identity. No one could even say the word Jewish, or see a painting by a Jewish artist, or read a Jewish book in Yiddish or Hebrew, where our writers would not even write the word "Jew" in print and would not be willing to use Jewish names'.

Yet that identity persisted. 'I never had the possibility to not be Jewish', she asserts, 'it is inscribed in every part of me, in my genes and so we learned to live not a double, but a two-fold life where officially you are one thing and you avoid questions of Jewish identity in public, but when you are at home, you are with mostly Jewish friends, so only at home, there when we assembled, we were the whole. The whole. One piece.'

These conditions are articulated by journalist Gal Beckerman in his book on Soviet Jewry, *When They Come For Us We'll be Gone*, in which he describes the lot of the 3 million Jews trapped inside the Soviet Union after World War II, whom he says 'were discouraged in every way from being Jews – synagogues were shuttered, Yiddish writers and academics executed', such that 'it was obvious to most observers that within a generation or two, the total assimilation or spiritual genocide of Soviet Jewry would be complete' (2010: 5).

Reflecting this dilemma, a 1969 letter from a group of Jewish intellectuals in Vilnius to the Lithuanian Communist Party stated: 'We are not wanted here. We are completely oppressed, forcibly denationalized and even publicly insulted in the press while at the same time forcibly kept here. As the Lithuanian proverb goes, He beats and he screams at the same time'. The authors of the letter decided to remain anonymous, explaining, 'we know well how people who had at one time or another protested against flourishing anti-Semitism were summarily dealt with. The Party has taught us to be watchful and we have to be watchful now as we write to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party. What painful irony' (Beckerman 2010: 119).

Through these years of 'two-fold life', Rachel studied law yet found it difficult to advance. As she explains, 'once you graduated they would send you wherever they needed specialists: to the Ministry of Justice, the Chief Prosecutor's office, the Scientific Ministry and so on but nobody wanted me because I was Jewish; there was one student, drinking, with bad grades, the worst student on the course,

and everybody wanted him, but I had excellent marks, and nobody needed me'. Given such bleak prospects, she took a menial job, studying English at night, and eventually secured a place at the Pedagogical Institute in Moscow. While there, she met and married an Armenian engineer and emigrated to his native country, where, she says, she was healed of the 'feeling of being Jewish' and the negativity she anticipated from others in response. After 5 years away, during which she harboured a 'big nostalgia' for Vilnius, she and her husband returned. Once again she faced the challenge of finding employment, finally landing the post of translator/interpreter in a technical institute where her husband worked as an engineer. For 20 years she reviewed scientific texts, translated abstracts and published newsletters under what she terms 'very harsh conditions'. Four women worked in her department, one of them the director's wife, who was both anti-Semitic and anti-Russian. Every morning, Rachel recalls:

> She would start the day with a mantra, like a prayer, 'do you know that Gorbachev is a Jew? And Yeltsin is a Jew?' and that was the main song, and then on to the Russians, 'they only come here for the sausage, they'd live anywhere . . .' and I had two Russians sitting there, but what could we say to her, she was the director's wife. It was very nerve-wracking. Probably my ulcers are from that time. You couldn't listen everyday to such anti-Semitic talk, it was an everyday fight to go to work.

Arendt expresses a similar sentiment, describing how the director of a charity concern in Paris, where she was located after the war, would, on receiving the card of a German-Jewish intellectual, with the inevitable 'Dr' on it, exclaim at the top of his voice: 'Herr Doktor, Herr Schnorrer' (one who habitually takes advantage of the generosity of others). For Arendt, the situation proved intractable: 'If we are saved', she wrote, 'we feel humiliated, and if we are helped we feel degraded. We fight like madmen for private existences with individual destinies since we are afraid of becoming part of that miserable lot of *schnorrers* . . .' (1994: 114). For Rachel, the daily degradations may well have continued unabated, had it not been for a serendipitous happening which plucked her from the masses of *schnorrers* and propelled her headlong into a very individual destiny. As she remembers it, as she was leaving for work one morning, she stopped dead in her tracks when she noticed a poster of a *Mogen Dovid* (Star of David) slapped onto a pole across the street. 'My first reaction was tremble', she recalls, 'they are taking us to a concentration camp, then a few seconds later, I came closer – I saw that a *Jewish* exhibition is going to be opened in Kaunas. And of course my whole Jewish blood came rushing to my mind, after so many years having been

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denied seeing anything Jewish, this was . . . a miracle, just a miracle to me'. And so it was, that on seeing this poster that Rachel entered her third story site: the Green House Jewish Museum.

The late 1980s had spawned the revival of a Lithuanian national movement, and by association, a Jewish national cultural movement. Headed by a young academic, Emanuelis Zingeris, this Jewish group began gathering dispersed cultural artefacts from the archives, libraries and museums. These were to be presented in Kaunas, in the first such display of Jewish symbols under Soviet rule. On arrival in the packed hall, Rachel was met by what she calls now: 'a new and wonderful experience . . . the candle holders, the *talitim* [prayer shawls], the *Kiddush* cups, the Jewish books, books in Yiddish, verses in Yiddish, the books are what mainly touched me'.

Auslander has argued that having the opportunity to touch, caress or wear a dead loved one's things may help those suffering from the melancholia of unresolved mourning to come to terms with definitive absence. Experiences, she claims, are lodged in things, and loss of the object-companion can therefore bring loss of the memory itself. People deprived of their things are equally severed from their pasts and from their dead (2005: 1018). While she is speaking primarily of individual memory and individual loss, her assumptions hold true for the collective who came face to face with their lost heritage, their 'loved one's things' in an otherwise anonymous hall in Kaunas in June 1988.

For Rachel, this event marked a homecoming to the material culture whose absence she had experienced so keenly: 'It was something outstanding', she exclaims, 'such an event in my life, the culture behind it. The regret and the pain that we couldn't have had it for my son before. They made us nameless, homeless, because a culture is home, rootless, the culture is home, is roots, a name, a family name, things we could be proud of, our writers, our artists, our scientists, our Nobel Prize winners. For the first time in my life, I encountered it and it was such excitement, such joy . . .' Her comments call to mind Benjamin's assertion that the most deeply held motive of the person who collects is the 'struggle against dispersion', against oblivion, against a blanking out (2007: 7), and for Rachel, it is precisely this struggle that the exhibition in Kaunas addressed.

Thus, the occasion served not merely as homecoming, but also as arrival, as re-insertion of the Jewish experience, so long exiled, into the national Lithuanian consciousness. The joy that overcame her when the Lithuanian leader addressed the crowd with the words: 'Brother and Sister Jews' is palpable, even now. 'I felt so comfortable', she explains, 'very free, to hear him say, "Dear Brother and Sister Jews." It was such excitement, you know a type of revenge, you see, you see, we

are, we are something, among us there are great people, it cannot be that we are despised, it's not true, it's not just, it cannot be, it cannot go longer'. These words echo those of German poet Hilde Domin who wrote: 'Being home, being able to belong, is not a matter of changing backdrops. Or of prosperity. It means sharing the responsibility. Not being a stranger. Being able to mix in, if need be. Having an innate right to have a voice' (1994: 130). Rachel's euphoric response to the simple phrase 'Brother and Sister Jews', her delight at finally being invited to 'mix in', as it were, is particularly understandable in light of Arendt's contention that at the basis of all exiles' descriptions of the past lies one human truth: that once they were *somebodies* about whom people cared, they were loved by friends, and even 'known by landlords as paying our rent regularly. Once, we could even buy our food and ride in the subway without being told we were undesirable' (1994: 115). It is the expression of a dignified past, of *somebodiness*, and the appeal for it to be, if not honoured, at the very least, acknowledged, that rings so consistently in Rachel's words.

The exhibition in Kaunas was followed months later by another in Vilnius in the same small building, the Green House, which today houses the collections over which Rachel presides. How then had she made the transition from technical science writer to museum director? In late 1988, Zingeris and his colleagues started visiting workplaces with Jewish employees, and eventually arrived at Rachel's technical institute. They assembled a small group during lunch hour and 'just started to talk about the history of Jews, the role of Jews in this country'. Rachel listened in awe. 'I opened my mouth, my ears and my eyes', she recalls, 'and when they said, "we want to establish a society for Jewish culture," I just ran up to Zingeris and said, "use me please, use me". He asked, "What can you do?" I said "I know English, I know Yiddish. I can write in both. I can type. I can wash windows. I can clean floors. I can, I can. Everything. I'll do whatever".' Thus began an association that has endured over 20 years.

On 6 September 1989, the Soviet administration ordered the reopening of the Jewish State Museum in Vilnius (the only such institution anywhere in the Soviet Union at the time), the expressed purpose of which was to 'recover from oblivion the history and culture of Lithuanian Jews and to reveal the tragedy of the Jewish people in World War II' (Kostanian 2006: 272). Of the level of financial support earmarked for the project Rachel is unclear. 'They gave us', she tells me, 'I don't remember the exact sum, whether it was 30,000 roubles or 300,000 roubles, really for me it was the same, the same astronomical figure'. The museum would eventually be spread across three buildings, with the Shoah

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exhibition located at Rachel's Green House. At the outset, her involvement was restricted to whatever after-work hours she could muster; before long, however, Zingeris offered her the full-time post of Scientific Secretary in charge of research and exhibits. She declined, dubious about the future of a Jewish museum in Vilnius. 'Emanuel', she told him, 'it's an illusion, it's impossible, a Jewish museum here in Vilnius, it's never ever going to happen, it's a dream'. It was only 2 years later – after she had witnessed the steady train of heritage tourists from Germany, South Africa, Argentina, Great Britain, the United States, from all over the world – arriving in her city, 'free people, people with dignity, openly talking about synagogues, about *Yeshivas*, about Jewish studies and books, all interested in Russian Jewry' in what she, the little *maidele* from Šiauliai had to say – that she finally accepted his offer.

Notwithstanding the collection Zingeris had amassed, the museum was short on exhibits, given that such large quantities of materials had already been destroyed. To combat this dearth, Rachel advertised in local and international media, offering to buy 'letters, books, photographs, manuscripts, clothes, dishes'. Slowly a collection began to form. At the heart of museum curatorship lies the polarity between the inherent value of an object and the archive developed to enable links between objects and memories to promote effective exploration of the past (Kavanagh 2000: 98). Within this process, history curators choose that which has evidence value, whether intrinsically, such as banners, flags or engraved objects, or through association – a hat or coat, a brush, which triggers the stories and memories with which the item is imbued.

The Green House is stacked with objects in both categories: ledgers of names and numbers of the deceased, sculptures, ritual objects, prayer books and plaques, ghetto uniforms, gold stars, ration books, alongside more pedestrian deposits: toys, hairbrushes, plates and other household articles. The cultural theorist Mieke Bal has described collecting not as a process about which a narrative can be told, but as itself a narrative (1992: 57). Within this context, it is possible to view the Green House Museum as a narrative chamber in which a group of Eastern European Jews achieve some form of immortality, their legacies lingering on in the objects which represent them, their beginnings, middles and fateful endings repeating themselves over and over with each new visitor to the space. The impact on visitors is evidenced in the countless testimonials which adorn the visitors' book and in the international reputation the museum has garnered as 'one of the most vital addresses in Eastern Europe for those interested in the calamitous genocide that is known as the Holocaust' (Katz 2010b).

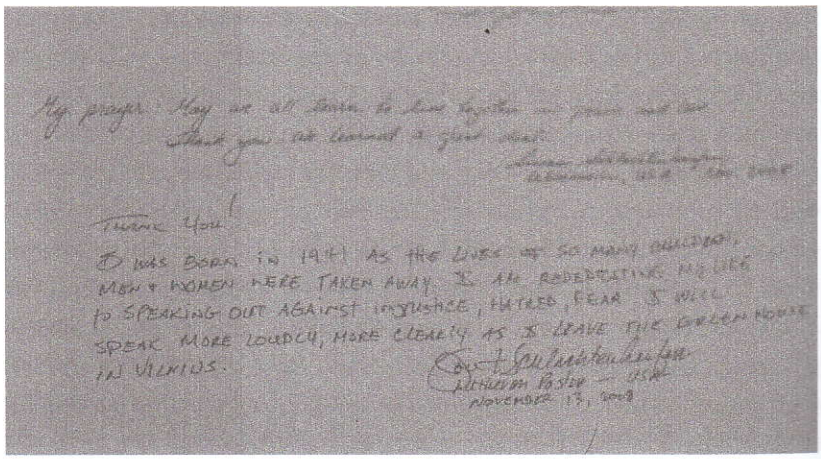

Figure 7.2 Comments left by visitors to the Green House.

While museums established in the Western tradition have long been disparaged for their sterility and non-emotionality for 'focusing on things rather than people, for being spiritually unattuned' (Kavanagh 2000: 101), in the Green House the opposite is true. Here in seven small, damp, dusty, dimly lit rooms, among the fading exhibits, worn carpets and peeling paint, it is the spiritual that is fore-grounded and privileged. Here, the object is 'anthropomorphized', taking on the human capacities to see, to hear and to feel (100). Visitors to the space cannot evade the knowledge of what each of these objects has witnessed. Walking from room to room, as Rachel unpacks the history of a letter, a small sculpture, a ledger, a photograph, I hear the fire crackling through prayer books, the boots stomping over *Menorahs,* the hands ripping apart gold *scheins*. Through these objects, and her words which animate them, I am carried into the heart of destruction, but I am also carried somewhere else. These rescued fragments now serve in the sense that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett invokes as 'documents', signs that point away from themselves and towards something else, towards 'life' (1998: 25). Behind the palette of obliteration that these items so palpably present, I see also the fingers that once lovingly held those torn, burnt prayer books and turned their pages, I see the mouths moving, silently reciting their words, I see the hands poised in the air to light the now bent *Menorahs* (sacred lampstands), I see the bodies once adorned by the now rumpled clothes. In these inanimate objects, I find the pulse that once beat in Jewish Vilna. And this space is life-giving even beyond that. Simone Weil posed the dilemma of exile as concisely as it has ever been expressed: 'To be rooted', she wrote 'is perhaps the most important and

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least recognized need of the human soul' (2001: 41). For Rachel then, a woman uprooted and exiled twice over, who lost a family, a nation, a culture, a career, a self, the Green House is a surrogate for all of these. When we finish our tour and sit for a while, faces of the perished partisans surrounding us on all four walls, she tells me:

> Ours is a culture that comes to us from 5,000 years ago, and my whole life I studied and learned another culture, and I didn't know about my own . . . where I belong, and this work at the museum is for me a hunt for roots. I acquire roots here, with everyone [glancing about her pointing to the images on the walls] . . . they are my family, all these, who are alive, who perished, who were killed, they became my family. I speak to them. . . . I gained a lost culture here, maybe a dead one, but we try to revive it, to study, and then to fix it. In Lithuania it should not be an unknown page of history and I would like to live until the day when they include our culture, our people into Lithuania's memory, not from a negative perspective: 'Oh, the Jews, the Bolsheviks, the Communists,' but from a normal point of view. That we are people, just like everyone else.

This is the vision that keeps Rachel going: the inclusion, the honouring of Jewish experience within the broader context of Lithuanian national history. Despite a continuing lack of government support, the Fascist marches, the anti-Semitic media campaign, the desecration of Jewish memorials, the paucity of Jewish history in mainstream education curricula, and the day-to-day challenges of maintaining a preservation site in a city where the loss of human memory has become part of the natural, topographical world, despite all of this, Rachel soldiers on. And she has plans: to renovate the museum exhibits; to create a film installation; to publish more works; to train more archivists; to gather more materials. 'For whom, for what?' I ask. 'For my family, of course', she answers. 'For each one. For my mother. For my father. For my uncles. For my dead family. For everyone'.

In the Green House the myth of a Jew as a Pariah, as an outsider, as a restless wanderer is reversed, and there is the hope, for Rachel, that in time, the notion of a Jew as somebody will seep, however slowly, into the national Lithuanian consciousness. As I take my leave from the Green House to walk down the steep incline, out onto the street, I stop briefly in the hallway to say my goodbyes. It is dark outside, the lights in the Green House flicker. There, silhouetted in the door frame of what is surely her final story site, stands Rachel Kostanian: survivor, survivor, steward, spiritual soldier.