

★ **IT was while in a Brooklyn Jewish secondary school that had banned Yiddish that DOVID KATZ was so incensed that, at just 15, he set up a Yiddish-English journal, *Aleichem Sholem*.**

That set New York City-raised Dovid on a path which today has seen him become the world's leading authority on the intricate language historically spoken by Ashkenazim.

Dovid, who divides his time between North Wales and the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, has since written dozens of books and papers on the subject.

And his latest, *East Broadway to Whitechapel* (Noir Press, £10), sees him put together evocative short stories translated from Yiddish by **Barnett Zumoff**.

"The origin of the book lies in my happy and inspirational years as a young Yiddishist who was thrilled to enter the small, poor, aged but wondrously resilient and creative Whitechapel-based group of Yiddish writers," Dovid said.

In the summer of 1975, aged 19, he became a devotee of Whitechapel's mystic Yiddish poet **AN Stencl**.

Stencl's circle kept high-level, sophisticated Yiddish literature alive — and he wouldn't speak a word of any language other than Yiddish.

"When I returned to London as a visiting student, I rented the attic of Yiddish writer and editor **IA Lisky**," Dovid recalled.

"The Whitechapel-based stories in the new book derive from my experiences among the last of the Yiddish literary mohicans in London, mostly in the East End."

Now 68, he was immersed in Yiddish and English from an early age. His Yiddish poet father, **Menke**, emigrated from Lithuania in 1920 aged 14, and schooled his son completely in Yiddish.

His mother, **Rivke**, was a Brooklyn-born artist of Ukrainian Jew-

## 'Zero respect for the language and culture'

ish heritage.

And, despite being raised in a largely secular environment, traditional Yiddish was always present in his life. His parents sent him to Orthodox Jewish day schools and, during his youth, his neighbourhood, Boro Park, was rapidly becoming chassidic.

During his time at the Yeshiva of Flatbush, Dovid and 50 of his classmates requested that Yiddish be included in the curriculum.

But their request was met with vehement opposition from the school's Israeli-born leadership, a reflection of the broader anti-Yiddish sentiment that prevailed in Israel's earlier years.

Dovid said: "They had a hate for Yiddish which was around in Israel's early years, where Yiddish was banned."

"It was a shock to see New York-born Jewish children being taught to have zero respect for the language, literature, and culture of their own parents, grandparents and great-grandparents."

It resulted in his Yiddish-English journal, *Aleichem Sholem*.

Despite those obstacles, Dovid's passion for Yiddish only grew stronger. As an undergraduate, he became the first to major in Yiddish linguistics at Columbia University.

# Yiddish is so cool for Katz



PASSION FOR YIDDISH: Dovid Katz

In 1978, he settled in London and began his doctorate on the origins of Yiddish.

That same week, **David Patterson**, the renowned Oxford scholar, was searching for an instructor of Yiddish, and therefore began Dovid's 18-year tenure at Oxford.

In December 1990, as the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, Dovid made his first trip to Lithuania in search of his father's roots.

His friend and mentor, the late **Harry Shukman** at Oxford, took him out for lunch and warned him not to make the journey.

He declared: "You have built this happy programme, and all you will find there is devastation and destruction."

"Whatever the Nazis didn't destroy, the Soviets will have bulldozed."

Despite those warnings, Dovid found something unexpected in Vilnius.

He recalled: "I discovered hundreds of Yiddish-speaking Jews and dialects I had never been able to find elsewhere."

He began to mount twice-a-year expeditions to record the last Jews of Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia. The thousands of tapes are being digitised and added to the Lithuanian Yiddish Video Archive, now on YouTube.

That first visit led to an agreement with Vilnius University to send Lithuanian students to study Yiddish at Oxford.

In 1999, after a one-year stint at Yale, he moved to Vilnius, becoming a professor of Yiddish language, literature and culture at Vilnius University.

However, his academic career in Lithuania took a dramatic turn in 2008 when he began speaking out against the country's attempts to revise Holocaust history, which included police coming to look for his department's Holocaust survivor librarian, **Fania Brantsovsky**, then in her 80s, accusing her of 'war crimes' for having escaped the Vilna Ghetto to join up with the anti-Nazi Jewish partisans in the forests.

"Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had many 'nationalists' who were quite happy to kill their Jewish neighbours," Dovid said. "It was the same in western Ukraine."

"The Holocaust in these lands

started in June 1941, and thousands of Jews were murdered there before the first Germans actually got there."

As these countries sought European Union and NATO status, a disturbing movement emerged to rewrite Holocaust history and glorify local collaborators and indeed to 'export' the revisionist history to a naive and unsuspecting west.

As a result, Dovid founded the web journal *Defending Jewish History* in 2009 to combat these distortions.

But his activism eventually cost him his job.

He explained: "When I was sacked in 2010, I asked what I had done wrong. I was told it was because of articles I had written in what they called 'far-left publications in the West', publications like *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*."

"The people in the cities of Lithuania are wonderful, tolerant and humorous. Young people, especially, do not suffer from the old prejudices."

"The tragedy is that a small ultra-nationalist and antisemitic elite is disproportionately powerful."

Over the past decades, there has been a revival in Yiddish culture, particularly in klezmer music.

However, Dovid is cautious when discussing the so-called revival of the Yiddish language itself.

"In countries like America and Britain, there were many prejudices about Yiddish, especially among the first generation born in those countries," he said.

"That began to change in the 1960s and 1970s in America, with the 'ethnic is beautiful' movement."

"Many Jewish students were discovering that their parents and grandparents had been part of Yiddish cultural movements."

At the same time, the last remaining immigrants from eastern Europe were dying, leading to a newfound romantic attachment to Yiddish.

But Dovid warned against overstating a revival. He added: "When speaking about language, you either learn to read it and write it, or you don't. The word 'revival' is vastly overstated."

"Very few secular or modern Jews have mastered Yiddish as part of this movement."

Yet he remains optimistic about the future of Yiddish, particularly among chassidic communities.

And his own certainty in the future of Yiddish is something he has put into practice with his free online *Yiddish Cultural Dictionary*.

Throughout his career, Dovid has also been a storyteller.

His early Yiddish fiction was set in London and New York but, he had shifted to writing stories set in pre-First World War Lithuania.

One of his key concerns is how future generations will interact with Yiddish.

"There are thousands of young Jews and some remarkable non-Jews who are enthusiasts," Dovid said.

"Among the chassidim, there are a million Yiddish speakers, many of them at child-bearing age."



HISTORIC: The Jewish burial ground in Bath

## Bath's Jewish community grew in the 18th century

★ **CHRISTINA HILSEN RATH is in the ideal position to chronicle the history of the Jewish community in Bath.**

The chairman of trustees of the **Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground** spent four years researching the community for the book *Jews in Bath, a community and their Burial Ground 1700-1945*.

"Set in the context of Jewish history, my book brings to life the individuals and families who lived, worked and worshipped in the city, together with the history of their synagogue, burial ground and all aspects of Jewish life in the city," Christina said.

"As a fashionable spa town from the early 18th century onwards, Bath attracted many Jewish visitors from all over the UK. With its unique hot springs and mild weather, it offered them a place of 'genteel residence' and good health, fashionable and comfortable society, high quality shops and entertainment."

"While some retired here, others continued to come for the season which now often lasted nine months from September to May. By the early 1800s, as travel times from London reduced to 10 hours from the 36 it had taken in the 1750s, the number of visitors was estimated to be more than 5,00 a year."

"These new visitors and residents required services, shops and tradesmen of all kinds, and had money to spend. Taking advantage of these commercial opportunities, Ashkenazi health professionals, skilled craftsmen, brokers, shopkeepers and traders began to arrive in Bath."

The book includes the story of **JOSEPH SIGMOND**, a Jewish exile from Poland and Lithuania, who arrived homeless and penniless in Exeter in 1772.

By the early 1800s, he had

opened a dental surgery in **Edgar Buildings, Bath**, close to **JACOB ABRAHAMS**, an optician in **Bartlett Street**.

A rival dentist was **SOLOMAN ABRAHAM DURLACHER**. Joseph's wife was **CATHERINE** while Soloman's wife **BETSY** was a chiropodist.

In Bath, there was no fixed place of worship until the 1820s. Before then services were held in private houses, including the home of **MOSES SAMUEL**.

Abraham Durlacher may also have hosted services, while his lodger, **HYAM BERNSTEIN**, was probably the first minister to the Bath community.

The first known public synagogue in Bath opened in 1822/3 at 19 Kingsmead Street and its first minister was **SOLOMON WOLFE**, who was born in Prussia in 1780.

He was reader of the congregation for almost 50 years.

By the late 1830s the Bath congregation decided that it needed a purpose built synagogue.

Moses Samuel provided the initial £300, the remainder of the £600 cost coming from donations.

The building, erected on the site of some old houses, was leased from **St John's Hospital**.

The foundation stone was laid on August 26, 1841, by **J Abraham** (most likely optician **Jacob Abraham**) and warden **BENJAMIN SAMUEL**. It was consecrated in May 1842.

Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground holds three open days this year — April 27, June 29 and September 14.

In addition, there will be a guided walk on June 15, with a second one to be arranged in October

For details on the book and events, visit [Bathjewishburialground.org](http://Bathjewishburialground.org)

## Party for Monty's 100th

★ **A CENTENARIAN** who served in the British army and the Royal Navy celebrated his 100th birthday on Sunday.

**MONTY BLACK**'s big day took place at Salford's Broughton House, the home for military veterans.

Originally in the Home Guard, he did six weeks' training in the army and transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals.

Everyone on the course then transferred to the navy.

In 1944, Monty was sent to Scotland to join HMS Scotia, a training ship.

He spent one seder night in a Royal Navy hotel among Jewish servicemen from all over the world, who had all gained leave to be out late.

But Monty was not deemed fit to rejoin the army and, instead, served in Ceylon and Colombo.

His family included his elder sisters **NITA** and **JOYCE**. Nita was the mother of prize-



winning novelist **HOWARD JACOBSON**, who was at his uncle Monty's party, along with his brother **STEPHEN**, a former member of the 1960s band *The Whirlwinds*.

Howard and Stephen's sister, **MARLY GOLDBERG** — who is a daily visitor to see her uncle — organised the party with her daughter, **AIMEE LAITHWAITE**.

Also present were Monty's great-great niece and nephews.