

The Lithuania Jewish Museum Rises from the Ashes

by
Howard Margol



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Jewish State Museum
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2001 Vilnius
Lithuania

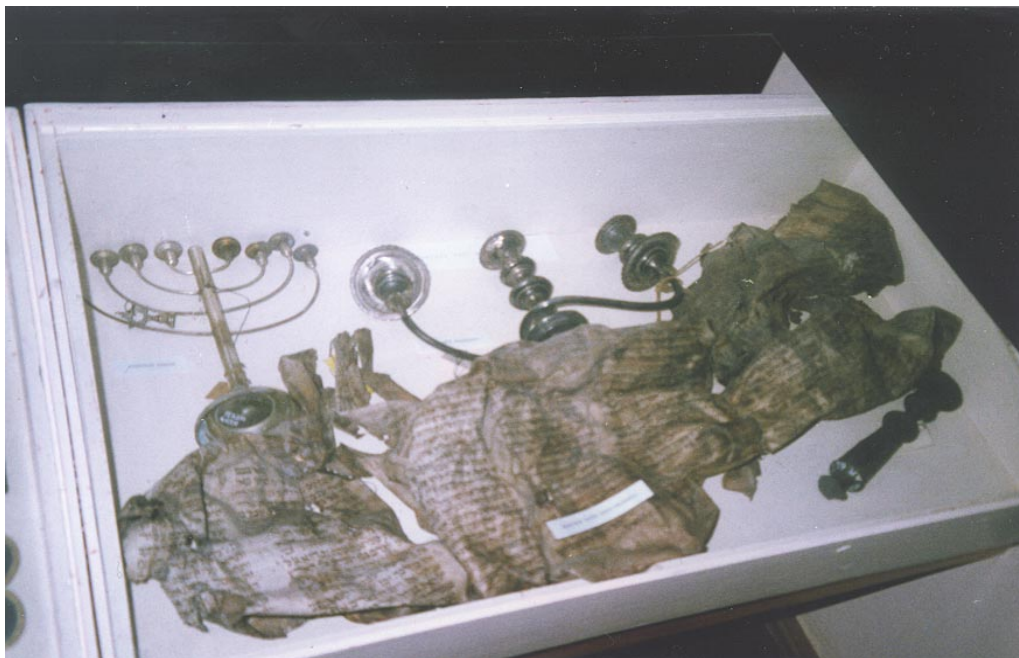
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A Jewish museum has been established in Vilnius three times. The first one opened in 1913, when a group of intellectuals established a Society of Lovers of Jewish Antiquity, along with a museum. The greater part of its collection of Jewish folklore, art, music, published and unpublished materials was destroyed during World War I. The Society was revived in 1919 and soon thereafter, the museum.

On the eve of the Second World War, the museum had accumulated more than 6,000 books, thousands of historical works and documents, various publications in eleven different languages and a rich folklore collection. Additionally, there were ancient coins, including Jewish ones from the last Hasmoneans and Bar-Kochba Period, as well as 3,000 works of art. The unique contents of this first Jewish museum were nearly all destroyed during the Second World War. The second museum was established in 1944, after the Soviet liberation, by survivors of the Nazi occupation. They extracted damaged paintings, sculptures, books, letters of famous Jewish writers, the diary of Theodor Herzl (the founder of the Zionist

movement), as well as other valuable documents out of cellars, attics and pits. Unfortunately, approximately thirty tons of invaluable documents which had survived were sent to paper mills by the local Soviet authorities. Even with that, there remained thousands and thousands of extremely valuable items and artifacts scattered about and stacked as high as the ceiling in the former Ghetto jail. This second museum had a very short life. The Soviet authorities closed the museum on June 10, 1949. Its collection was scattered among other Lithuanian museums and archives.

The late 1980's saw a strong revival of a Lithuanian national movement, and of a Jewish national cultural movement. On October 1, 1989 the Soviet Lithuanian authorities permitted the opening of the third Jewish museum in Vilnius. Emanuelis Zingeris, a young academic, was the first Chairman of the Museum. He later became the first Jewish member of the Lithuanian Parliament. The main responsibility for maintaining the museum, and building its collections, fell on the shoulders of Rachel Kostanian, the Vice-Director. Rachel has devoted



■ Torah fragments, museum exhibition, 1993 (photo credit: Vitaly Chumak)

her life to the museum. In addition to taking visitors through the museum, Rachel fills many speaking engagements in various European countries as well as in the United States.

The Museum continuously researches, collects, and exhibits material on Jewish history and culture in Lithuania. The Museum staff assists the Lithuanian population and visitors from abroad, to acquire knowledge about the history, destruction and contemporary life of Lithuanian Jews. The museum receives a small amount of monetary support from the Lithuanian government which is augmented by contributions from individuals. The museum has a continuous struggle to acquire sufficient funds to maintain itself, increase its collection of materials and artifacts and organize major exhibitions.

Occasionally, the staff includes one or two volunteers from Austria's *Gedenkdienst* program. *Gedenkdienst* is the German word for "memory work" or "memory service." Under the program, Austrian youth who conscientiously object to compulsory military service are given the option to assist the remnants of the Eastern European Jewish communities. At the museum, the Austrian youth give tours in English and/or German. They also travel to other parts of Lithuania, speaking to adults and school groups, about the Holocaust. Their most moving contribution is guiding German and Austrian visitors through the Museum and showing them photographs and other documentation of the destruction of 94% of the Pre-World War II Jewish community of Lithuania.

A few years ago, one of the Jewish female workers in the Museum, discovered the 1942 Vilnius Ghetto list of Jewish residents which was stored in one of the archives in Vilnius.



■ Museum interior, 1993 (photo courtesy of the Museum)



■ Museum entrance, 1993 (photo courtesy of the Museum)

The Ghetto list had lain undiscovered for fifty-four years! The Jewish Museum workers painstakingly keyed into their computer the entire list of 15,000 names, their year of birth, occupation and the ghetto address where they lived. A book was published by the museum containing the entire list of names together with extremely interesting information about what life was like in Vilnius after the German occupation. In July, 1998 Volume II was published (*The Jewish Museum: Vilnius Ghetto: List of Prisoners*, Vol. 1 [Vilnius: 1996] and Vol. II [Vilnius: 1998]). This book contains an alphabetized list of the ghetto Jews and also the names of all of the Jews who were in various work camps in the area around Vilnius. The Museum workers also discovered the original 1942 census of the Kaunas (Kovno) and Siauliai (Shavel) ghettos. Also see: *Siauliai Ghetto: Lists of Prisoners* (Vilnius, 2002). The book contains the list of the residents of the Siauliai ghetto, as well as information about life in the ghetto.

The Kaunas ghetto list and information will be published as soon as the Museum has the necessary funds.

A branch of the Museum is located at:

Jewish Community Center

Pylimo 4

2006 Vilnius, Lithuania

Tel: 370/2/61-30-03; Fax: 370/2/22-79-15

e-mail: jewishcom@post.5ci.lt

The branch museum exhibition includes Torah scrolls, talits, Torah shields, menorahs, a circumcision chair, an etrog box, and other items -- approximately 250 items in all.

Yes, the Jewish Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania has truly "risen from the ashes".



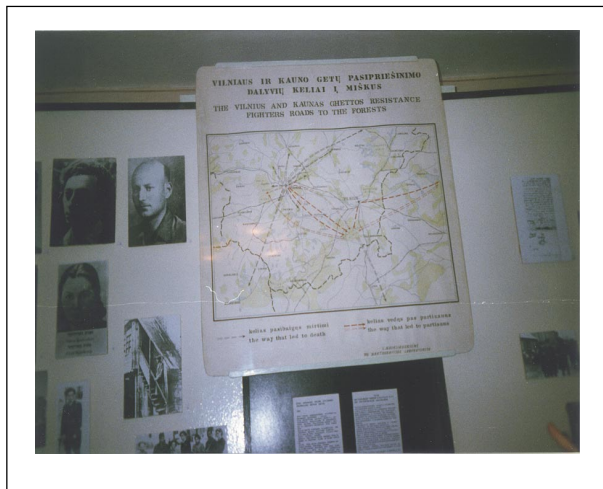
■ Museum exhibition, 1993 (photo credit: Vitaly Chumak)



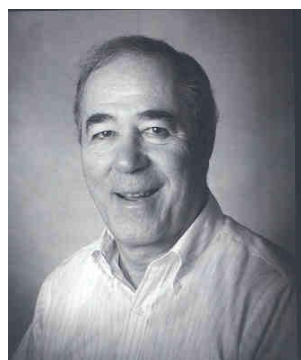
■ Museum exhibition, 1993 (photo credit: Vitaly Chumak)



■ Museum guide explains exhibition, 1993 (photo credit: Vitaly Chumak)



■ Museum map showing the Vilnius and Kaunas Ghettos resistance fighters roads to the forests, 1993 (photo credit: Vitaly Chumak)



Howard Margol is the Immediate Past President of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS). He is also a past president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Georgia. Howard travels regularly to Lithuania for humanitarian and research purposes and has organized and led nine different group trips to Lithuania and Latvia. Howard has done extensive genealogical research and has

traced his family back to 1747. Howard is also the co-founder and Secretary-Treasurer of the "American Fund For Lithuanian-Latvian Jews, Inc." a non-profit charity. Howard has written numerous articles that have been published in *Avotaynu* as well as in various newsletters and newspapers. He has also lectured on genealogical topics at group meetings and conferences.