

SNAPSHOTS FROM VILNA:

Memories of the Vilnius Summer Program in Yiddish, July-August 2010

By Rachel Mines

The Summer Program in Yiddish was founded in Oxford, England, in 1982 by Professor Dovid Katz. In 1998, the program relocated to the University of Vilnius, Lithuania, and is now administered by the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, whose mandate is the “preservation, enrichment, and continuity of Yiddish and East European Jewish culture.” The four-week program offers an intensive schedule of classes, seminars, and field trips featuring Yiddish language, literature, culture and history.- R.M.

The double-decker bus disgorges its passengers, cameras snapping, into the leafy square of the Lithuanian village of Eishishkes, once called Eishishok, an important centre of Jewish culture and learning. It is a hot Sunday morning in August. A young man, sleeping off last night’s drinking binge under a nearby tree, staggers to his feet, stares blankly at the strangers, and wanders off. Startled locals emerge from their houses to watch the tourists gather around their guide, who energetically waves at the empty street, a tree, the local shops. The tourists troop off chattering to photograph a ruined sports hall, a row of houses, the kindergarten’s playground, a rock. An hour later, they clamber aboard their bus and leave. The locals go back to their business. They may (or may not) have known, or cared, that the empty street, the row of houses, had once been the centre of the prewar Jewish community. The abandoned sports hall was the synagogue; the playground the Jewish cemetery; the rock a commemorative marker.

My partner and I are walking from our rented flat down Zydu (Jew) Street to the University of Vilnius. We have just passed a large display board marking the site of the Great Synagogue, now the front lawn of a kindergarten. On Gaono Street, we

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Vilnius Ghetto tour.



Street sign in Vilnius.

pass a statue of the Vilna Gaon, a renowned Jewish scholar and teacher of the 18th century, which stands before his house. Our route is short: five minutes down narrow, cobble streets, past tidy pastel-painted facades adorned with window shutters and flowerboxes. But memory is long.

Once the poor Jewish quarter of Vilna, in World War II this neighbourhood formed part of the ghetto. Between 1941 and 1943, almost all the Jews who walked these winding alleys were murdered and buried in mass graves near the village of Ponar, just south of Vilna. Now the neighbourhood is part of the fashionable Old City, and Jews—tourists and residents alike—

are safe, even coddled in its restaurants and shops. Reminders linger, though, never far from the surface: a plaque on a wall; a faded Yiddish shop sign that few now can read; the emptiness where a synagogue should be.

I am in Professor Karolina Szymaniak’s third-level Yiddish class, which I joined after deciding the second-level reading—a story about *bobbes* (grannies) and kittens—was not challenging enough. Karolina’s class is reading a poem about the 1902 execution by hanging of a young Jewish rebel, Hirsh Leckert. The poem is packed with symbolism, imagery, religious allusions. Many of the words, in the Hebraic component of Yiddish, are to me unreadable, unpronounceable, ciphers. Karolina explains in rapid-fire Yiddish, most of which sails over my head. She asks us to turn to page 42 (in Yiddish, “two and forty”); I open my textbook to page 24.

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After she leaves the room, having rattled off the next day's homework, which I fail to comprehend, I turn rather stupidly to a classmate: "What did she say?"

I am sitting in the coffee bar across the street from my rented flat, a cooling cappuchino at my elbow. With the aid of an online Yiddish dictionary, I am laboriously working my way through the next day's readings: 10 pages of poetry and a short story by Sholem Aleichem. I calculate that, at my current reading speed, if I work through the night, I might just finish in time for class tomorrow. It can't be done. I soldier on nevertheless.

The modern, comfortable coffee bar is a reminder of home. The waitress hands me my change as I leave. "Achoo," I say politely, *thank you*: my one word of Lithuanian, which to me sounds like a childish joke. At first, with Canadian reticence, I was embarrassed to use the word, but nobody laughs, and now it comes more easily.

When I get back from the coffee bar, I find my partner in the kitchen of our rented flat. He is making dinner, having adapted well to his role of "baleboste" (housewife). We eat smoked fish, black bread, pickled cabbage, beet salad, sour cream: the food we both grew up on and always thought of as "Jewish food," but which we now know is generically Eastern European. Like many of our fellow students, we rave about the tastes of Vilnius: herring, rye bread, sausage, pickled cucumbers, potato pancakes, strong black coffee. Tastes of childhood, tastes of home.

I am dreaming in Yiddish. Words, phrases, intonations run disconnectedly through my mind, a stream linking me to my Yiddish-speaking past.

I am in the supermarket, studying labels in the dairy cooler. I used to be able to read. Now I examine pictures on labels. The Latinate words on the ingredients list help a bit, but what is "curkus"? The foil-wrapped package in my hands is shaped like butter, but surely the ingredients list is too long? I turn to a fellow shopper, a blonde Lithuanian woman. I point to the label. "Butter?" She frowns, understanding the intonation but not the word. "Margarine," she offers, and I understand despite the hard "g." I extend my forefingers next to my head, like horns. "Margarine—Moool!"

She laughs and hands me a package of butter. "Achoo."

I am in Prof. Abraham Lichtenbaum's class, giving an oral presentation in Yiddish. "I am Level 2 ?," I explain haltingly. "I don't know many words, so if I forget something, perhaps you can help." I talk about my father's *shtetl* of Shkud, now Skuodas, which I had visited two weeks earlier with the help of a Lithuanian guide. I was able

to meet several older people who remembered the pre-war Jewish community, one of whom recognized a photo of my father, and another whose family used to buy shoes from my family's shop. One man walked us to the corner where the *shammes* would stand, calling the congregation to prayer on Friday

evenings. Our informant remembered the words, and singsonged them to us in Yiddish: "*In shul arain*" (to the synagogue). His words floated into the air from the past, like ghosts.

"*Zeyer gut*" (very good), says Abraham, with a big smile and a thumbs-up. I return to my seat for his discussion of a short story by I.

M. Weisenberg, a story, like many others, about the conflict between traditional *shtetl* life and the modern, secular world. Abraham dances through his lecture, gesturing with hands and body, explicating theme, character, symbols: concepts which, as a literature teacher, I understand. But whenever I stop to think "He's speaking Yiddish!" I am lost. A few seconds later, as my self-consciousness fades, the meaning shines through, and I once again immerse myself in the flow of words and ideas.

The tour bus lets us out at a bare place in the forest about 40 kilometres from Vilnius. We have come to visit a former partisan base, guided by Fania Brantsovsky, once a partisan, now the Yiddish Institute's librarian. Short and grey-haired, in her eighties, Fania energetically strides through the trees, explaining in a non-stop flow of Yiddish: this is what happened, this is what we did, this is how we lived. It is over 30 degrees, and the forest swarms with mosquitoes. I am thirsty. My ankles



Vilnius University.



Rachel in Partisan woods.

are swelling. “And furthermore...” Fania continues, gesturing broadly, and leads us to the next clearing. We students, years, decades younger, trail behind. Fania is indefatigable. I wilt.

We are in Vilnius’s Jewish Community Centre:

a prewar Jewish school, externally unpretentious, modestly situated in a row of similar grey weathered façades. It is rather grand on the inside, with wide hallways and an imposing granite staircase. It is 9:00 on Friday evening, and we—the Yiddish Institute students, faculty, and staff, together with members of the Vilnius Jewish community—have come together to welcome the Shabbes. The long hall is

filled with tables, placed end to end. Dishes have been set out with nuts, fruit, cheese, pickled herring, vegetables, and the ubiquitous Lithuanian beer snacks—crunchy strips of garlicky rye bread, salted, deep-fried, and dangerously addictive. A warming tray contains hard-boiled eggs and kasha. People and conversations fill the room. When most of the places are occupied, the Program director, Elliot Palevsky, welcomes us. Wearing a scarf over her hair, Indre Joffyte, the admin-



Shabbes Tish at Vilnius JCC.

istrative coordinator, lights and blesses the candles. A young married couple, both students, he tall and thin, she short and comfortably round, recite the blessings over the bread and wine.

We dig into the platters of food. Bottles of vodka make the rounds. Some-

one begins a Yiddish folksong, and then another, and another. The room gets warm, then hot. Voices join in. The songs get louder. A group of five young Eastern European women sings with great animation: songs in Polish, Russian, Yiddish. I am not sure who in the room is Jewish. Many are not; they are students, teachers, researchers, all with an interest in Jewish

life, culture, language. A young Lithuanian assistant at the Institute, whom I’m pretty sure is gay, wafts by, laughing. I know by now that Lithuania is not a good place to be gay. But this place is safe. Jewish, gentile, straight, gay: tonight we are all Yiddish, belting out Yiddish songs until our voices hurt, whether or not we know the words. It is a happy defiance: speaking, singing, shouting, laughing, Yiddish in Vilna. Unabashedly Yiddish in Vilna. ♦

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blood poisoning which drained the family savings and put these discussions on hold. But a split had emerged; while my sister and I argued for going to Palestine to live on a kibbutz, my mother and brother were more in favour of New York. The war experiences my sister and I had gone through, plus the socialist tradition in both our parents’ families back in Poland, attracted us more to the ideals of Zionism than to the prospects of facing further discrimination for being Jewish in the U.S. With the arrival of the first papers for immigration to the U.S., my mother’s and brother’s position prevailed, and we arrived in New York by boat in May 1949.

Reflecting on those years, I can say that my childhood was abnormal, and I was marked by

psychological wounds resulting from the insecurity caused by the constant need to escape from one environment to another, without the love and emotional comfort that my mother and family could have given me. I never got to know my grandfather or my uncles and aunts in Poland who disappeared in the Holocaust. The limited school attendance of the war years affected my later educational capability and my ability to concentrate.

Ever since this early period, I have suffered from personality disorders: anxiety syndrome, fear of technology and machines, fear of travelling. These disorders made my assimilation into U.S. society difficult after we emigrated there in 1949, which was one reason I returned to Europe in the early 1960s. I did postgraduate stud-

ies in international relations in Vienna, where I met my wife, and I have lived in Denmark ever since.

It is an irony of my personal history that, after learning more about Zionism and Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, I am glad that my mother took the decision of emigrating to the United States rather than to Palestine in 1949. I have become repulsed by this Jewish injustice that was and is perpetrated on human beings by a political movement that has opportunistically hijacked my suffering, and that of millions of Jews during the Second World War, and uses it as the moral legitimation for crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, too many of the Jewish victims have failed to connect the dots of their personal experience with that of the Palestinians. ♦