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Forgotten Memory

The Jews of Vilne in the Diaspora

The way East European Jews are remembered is subject to increasing examination, but very little is known about how East European Jews remember. Most Holocaust survivors did not return to their hometowns and villages, but settled around the world. Jewish hometown associations, or *landsmanshaftn*, kept alive the memory of the places they had left behind, and the Holocaust. This is seen in the case of the Jews of Vilnius, or Vilne as it is called in Yiddish. The way they view the past differs fundamentally from the way Jews still living in Vilnius see it. This contains the potential for conflict over cultural heritage and the interpretation of history, as evidenced in the dispute over materials from the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

The collapse of Communism in 1989 was accompanied by a rediscovery of the Jewish past and an increase in commemorative events dedicated to the Holocaust. Both phenomena are undoubtedly of crucial importance to the pluralistic, historically conceived, contemporary self-perception of the East European societies in whose midst Nazis carried out the genocide of the Jews. Some members of these societies even participated in this genocide. Today, Eastern European has to come to terms with the void left behind by the Holocaust.

The politics of remembrance and the scholarship on memory usually take a national point of view. Far less attention is paid to those directly affected: the Holocaust survivors, their families, and the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. The way others remember the East European Jews is subject to increasing examination, but very little is known about how East European Jews remember. Although Jewish remembrance in Eastern Europe is centred around generally recognised dates and sites of commemoration, the fixation on common, external points of reference fails to notice significant differences in the treatment of the past. For example, Jewish memorial activities between 1944 and 1989 took place for the most part outside Eastern Europe – not just because of the repressive attitude of Communist regimes towards the Holocaust, but because most of the East European Jews who survived the Holocaust left their hometowns and villages soon after the Second World War. The surviving community of Jews from Vilnius, or Vilne – as the city is called in Yiddish and will be called here in reference to the prewar Jewish community and its members – offers an example of the consequences that mass emigration was to have on Jewish memory of Eastern Europe. But first, the differences between commemoration, remembrance, and mourning must be illuminated, as they are of fundamental importance to how the Holocaust is treated.

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Commemoration, Remembrance, Mourning

The *memorial turn* that has embraced the East Central- and East European public over the past two decades has generated a variety of concepts and terms and, as a result, a certain amount of confusion over terminology as well. At the moment, there are almost as many different uses of the terms “commemoration”, “collective memory”, “remembrance”, or “places of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*) as there are authors writing about these topics. Frequently, these terms are used as synonyms for one another. In order to provide some orientation within this semantic jungle, I suggest a differentiation based on particular meanings of the German words *gedenken* (to commemorate) and *erinnern* (to remember). *Gedenken* contains the root *denken* (to think) and therefore entails a deliberate act of calling to memory or marking by ceremony. It requires no direct connection between the commemorator and the events or those affected by them and can function at a great social and temporal distance from what is being commemorated. *Gedenken* does not demand direct involvement in the past, but merely a certain idea and fundamental knowledge of this past. *Erinnern*, by contrast, should be thought of in this context as the act of recalling a personal experience. Strictly speaking, one remembers something in which one was involved, with which one has come into contact.

Unlike *gedenken*, *erinnern* frequently cannot be controlled, especially when it is associated with trauma – as is remembrance of the Holocaust. Many survivors still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, an affliction characterised by the inability to curb constantly recurring, distressing memories:

What was previously experienced runs almost incessantly through the heads of many who are traumatised.... They cannot “switch off” the thoughts, rebukes, and self-accusations. Memories force themselves upon them again and again. Shripping memories tend to come back in agonising detail and vividness, especially just before sleep.... But some traumatised people go through their extreme experiences not just in memories or dreams. It can happen that they suddenly behave or feel as if they are going through the traumatic experience again (flashback). The memory symptoms are connected with strong emotions and feelings, which repeatedly send the person affected into a psychological shock.... To defend themselves from the anxieties caused by memory symptoms, those affected often try, consciously and unconsciously, to push away and avoid thoughts and situations that trigger memories of what was experienced.¹

In Eastern Europe, where the Holocaust was taboo for more than half a century, and where specialised psychological care remains scarce, survivors find it especially difficult to deal with their memories. In addition, the survivors’ memories of the Holocaust are always associated with the grief felt for their murdered relatives, friends, and

¹ Matthias Schützwohl, “Posttraumatische Belastungsstörung. Die Folgen extrem belastender Ereignisse”, Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen e.V., ed., *Informationsreihe Psychische Erkrankungen und ihre Behandlung* (Bonn ³1997), pp. 2–3.

almost all of their social and cultural peers. Mourning, as Micha Brumlik has aptly put it, is to be understood as “an emotion of closeness” (*Nahemotion*) related to “familiar people or those perceived as familiar”.² Often, survivors do not know where and when the people who were close to them died and therefore lack a location or date to which they can symbolically attach their mourning.

The commemoration days and places that have been nationally recognised since 1989 serve as a substitute. Even if they always mean for survivors a painful confrontation with their grief and memories they would rather forget, such days and places can still fulfil an important function in working through and coping with traumas and can contribute to stabilising emotions. For one, they offer a concrete focal point where survivors can care for their dead loved ones; for another, this kind of clearly defined framework, together with communal rituals of mourning, can bring the individual pain survivors feel under some control. The attention of the immediate environment is also enormously important for the processes of grieving and healing, as is public acknowledgement. Together they break the monstrous silence that follows in the wake of genocide.³

With this in mind, the public acknowledgement that accompanies official, usually national commemoration days should be viewed as very positive. At the same time, however, the enormous political significance attached to such events in Eastern Europe encroaches on the space left for survivors to grieve and to remember. With their accession to the European Union, most East Central European countries have adopted Western conventions of commemoration. In many countries, the day commemorating the Holocaust is observed by an act of state, the protocol of which is determined by state authorities such as the office of the head of state, the president of the parliament, or in some cases the protocol department of the foreign ministry.

Attention at these occasions falls on the individual speakers’ assertions that it is very important for the country and for Europe as a whole never to allow the Holocaust to be forgotten, so that nothing similar can happen again. The formulaic way in which these pleas are uttered may well meet international standards and the general requirements of reverence. However, they all too often neglect the feelings and needs of the survivors, their families, and the Jewish communities, all the more so as such statements are rarely ever followed by corresponding action in everyday politics.

² Micha Brumlik, “Trauerrituale und politische Kultur nach der Shoah in der Bundesrepublik”, in Hanno Loewy, ed., *Holocaust. Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte* (Reinbek bei Hamburg 1992), pp. 191–212, here p. 197.

³ Hans Keilson, “Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern durch ‘man-made-disaster’”, in Alexander Friedmann, et al., eds., *Überleben der Shoah – und danach. Spätfolgen der Verfolgung aus wissenschaftlicher Sicht* (Vienna 1999), pp. 109–126; Dori Laub, “Zeugnis ablegen oder Die Schwierigkeiten des Zuhörens”, in Ulrich Baer, ed., *Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen. Erinnerungskultur nach der Shoah* (Frankfurt am Main 2000), pp. 68–83; idem, “Die prokreative Vergangenheit: Das Fortleben historischer Traumatisierung”, in Harald Welzer, ed., *Das soziale Gedächtnis. Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung* (Hamburg 2001), pp. 321–338.

Milieus and Places of Remembrance: Survivors from Vilnius

Those who seek to examine the Jewish past in Eastern Europe are today confronted by the tremendous void left by the Holocaust and preserved by the Communist regimes' repressive attitude towards the reconstruction of Jewish life after the war.⁴ Little attention has been given to the consequences of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe in the immediate postwar period. Emigration meant that what was left of the Jewish community declined even more dramatically. The centre of East European Jewish life shifted overseas.

With the departure of these emigrants – who included the overwhelming majority of surviving Jewish leaders, cultural figures, educators, and intellectuals – Eastern Europe lost not only an enormous treasure trove of knowledge and valuable perspectives on its Jewish past. A large part of those Jewish cultural assets that had been saved from the Nazis was also transferred to the West, where it became the foundation for important research and documentation centres, such as the Hebrew University and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut) in New York.

The postwar history of Vilne's survivors is as a good example of this development. When the Red Army liberated Vilnius on 12 July 1944, it found 500 survivors remaining from the city's prewar community of 60,000 Jews.⁵ In the months that followed, several hundred Vilne Jews returned from labour camps or hideouts, from partisan units or the Soviet interior, to which they had been deported by the Soviets before the German invasion, or to which they had fled after the invasion. However, the overwhelming majority of the Jews who gathered in postwar Vilnius were originally from other parts of Lithuania or the Soviet Union. By the end of 1945, there were 10,000-12,000 Jews living in Vilnius.⁶

Immediately upon liberation, a group of Jewish intellectuals who had been in the Vilna ghetto and then with the Soviet partisans set about securing remnants of the Jewish past. For example, they started recording accounts of what the Jews had experienced during the German occupation.⁷ Their main activity, however, was to bring together the numerous Jewish archival materials, books, and works of art that had been hidden from the Germans.⁸ Although the Soviet authorities had approved the

⁴ The following arguments are based on my *dissertation Vilne, yidishlekh fartrakht... Kulturelle Erinnerung, Trauma, Migration. Die Vilne-Diaspora in New York, Israel und Vilnius nach dem Holocaust*, (University of Potsdam 2006).

⁵ Dov Levin, "July 1944 – The Crucial Month for the Remnants of Lithuanian Jewry", *Yad Vashem Studies*, 16 (1984), pp. 333–361, here p. 361; Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem 1980), pp. 27–28; A. Suzkewer, "Das Ghetto von Wilna", in Wassili Grossman, et al., eds., *Das Schwarzbuch. Der Genozid an den sowjetischen Juden* (Reinbek bei Hamburg 1995), pp. 457-547, here p. 457.

⁶ Szmerke Kaczerginski, *Tsvishn hamer un serp. Tsu der geshikhte fun der likvidatsye fun der yidisher kultur in Sovetn-rusland* (Paris 1949), p. 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

⁸ The Vilna ghetto had to provide a unit of forced labourers – the *papir-brigade* – for Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, one of the Nazis' principle agencies of plunder, in order to "select" Jewish collections, i.e. to forward the valuable materials to Frankfurt am Main and Prague for Nazi institutions of Jewish research and to take the rest (a quota of 70 per

creation of a museum of Jewish art and culture, it soon became clear that the conditions for Jewish cultural activity would worsen under Stalin. With this in mind, museum employees began to organise the secret transfer of the valuable items to free countries.⁹

It is due to their great sense of historical awareness, the tradition of Jewish self-help and historiography from below, as well as the experience gained in the cultural resistance to Nazi occupation that these valuable repositories of culture and knowledge “emigrated” and could be made available to the public in the countries that received them.¹⁰ The Jewish museum in Vilnius, however, was closed in 1948, and what was left of its holdings was integrated into Lithuanian collections or confiscated by the Soviet censors.¹¹ In addition to the ever-present consequences of genocide and the restrictions placed on Jewish cultural life, everyday life was also increasingly subjected to political and social constraints. Many of the Jews in Vilnius soon recognised that the city had nothing more to offer them. With few exceptions, the surviving Jews of Vilne left the city between 1944 and 1947. This was made possible by the fact that, as former Polish citizens, they were permitted to leave for Poland under a repatriation treaty negotiated between Poland and the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic in September 1944. Departure was accompanied by a radical change of perspective, as evidenced by this quote from a 1948 article:

Our Yerushalayim deLita [Jerusalem of Lithuania] is no longer there... – Yes, Vilnius still exists, the geographical name is still there and will probably exist forever, but o u r Vilne is no longer there. Our Vilne is now homeless [*na-venad*].... Today, we can encounter a true Vilne face only abroad.¹²

Łódź, for a time after the Second World War the largest transit centre in Europe, was the first destination of the Vilne Jews. In April 1946, they founded the Association of Vilne Jews in Poland (*Farband fun Vilner Yidn in Poyln*), which set for itself four tasks: 1. the registration of survivors, maintenance of contacts with Vilne hometown associations, or *landsmanshaftn*, around the world, and the social support of Vilne Jews in Poland; 2. the commemoration of Jewish Vilne before and during the war; 3.

cent was set) to a paper mill. The story of the papir-brigade is depicted in David E. Fishman, *Embers Plucked from the Fire: The Rescue of Jewish Cultural Treasures* (New York 1996).

⁹ The immediate circumstances of this cultural transfer, which was illegal from the Soviet point of view, are not well documented, see Fishman, *Embers Plucked*; Kaczerginski, *Tsvishn hamer*, p. 88.

¹⁰ On the tradition of East European Jewish historiography from below, which was spurred originally by the 1881 pogroms, see Anke Hillbrenner, *Diaspora-Nationalismus. Zur Geschichtskonstruktion Simon Dubnows* (Göttingen 2007), pp. 148–167; Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington 2007); Laura Jockusch, “‘Khurbn Forshung’: Jewish Historical Commissions in Europe, 1943-1949”, *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Institut*, 6 (2007), pp. 441–473.

¹¹ Fishman, *Embers Plucked*; Marek Web, “Tsu der geshikhte funem YIVO-arkhiv”, in Joshua Fishman, ed., *Lekoved fuftsik yor YIVO, 1925–1975*, Yovel-band XLVI (New York 1980), pp. 168–191.

¹² *Vilner opklang. Byuletin fun Farband fun Vilner yidn in Poyln (Umperyodishe oysgabe)*, 1 (January 1948), pp. 1–2. Emphasis as in the original.

Yiddish-speaking cultural activities; and 4. the search for German war criminals and the collection of evidence.¹³ The statutes of the association included a comprehensive programme of commemoration, which described in detail whom and what should be commemorated, and how this was to be institutionalised:

The memory of the 150,000 Jewish victims from the city and region of Vilne [is to be] perpetuated through the creation of heritage [*yerushe*] commissions with all of the Vilne *landsmanshaftn*, which will dedicate themselves to:

- the collection of all materials, documents, photographs, memoirs, articles, and books that tell about the centuries of Jewish life and creativity in Yerushalayim deLita;
- the collection, recording and copying of all documents, eyewitness accounts, diaries, letters, memoirs, drawings and photographs that are available among the Vilne survivors and address: life in the Vilna ghetto, Vilner in the concentration camps, in resistance groups, partisan formations, in the Red Army, the Polish Army and in allied armies; Vilne Jews on the Aryan side, in emigration (Soviet Union and other countries); non-Vilne Jews in the Vilna ghetto; Vilne non-Jews who rescued and hid Jews and Jewish children; non-Jewish citizens of Vilne who betrayed Jews or participated in their murder; Jewish traitors.

All of these collected materials are to be handed over to YIVO, the historical archive Yad Vashem in Erez-Israel or other Jewish academic institutions, with the aim that Vilne rooms will be established [there] – museum archives of Yerushalayim deLita.

The association will see to the establishment of a corresponding commemoration fund:

- to furnish and maintain the Vilne rooms;
- to provide scholarships and prizes for the most prolific collectors and the most important collections, the best research and studies on the 4-year martyrdom of Jewish Vilne and the centuries of history of constructive Jewish national life in Vilne in all its forms;
- for the publication of a memorial [*yizker*] album for the murdered Jews and their destroyed social institutions; for the publication of the [series] “Bleter vegn Vilne” [Pages about Vilne] and of periodicals, in which the most important materials, documents, memoirs and historical papers as well as “Vilne news” on the life and activities of the Vilner in their *landsmanshaftn* will be published around the world.¹⁴

¹³ “Farband fun yidn fun Vilne un umgegn. Oystsugn fun shtatut”, in Leyzer Ran and Leibl Korisky, eds., *Bleter vegn Vilne*, pp. 69–70; Archiv Bet Lohamei Hagetaot, file 2,980, *Shtatut, Ziomkostwo Żydów Wilnian w Polsce / Farband fun Vilner Yidn in Poyln, Lodz*, (June 1946).

¹⁴ “Farband fun yidn fun Vilne un umgegn”.

None of this could be realised in Łódź. Much of what had already been started semi-legally in Vilnius and had then been formulated and systematised in the Łódź statutes was, however, set in motion here and realised – in part decades later – in Israel or New York.

On the basis of the central registry that the Łódź association compiled with the cooperation of Vilne *landsmanshafn* abroad, it was assumed in 1947 that approximately 3,500 Jews from Vilnius had survived the Holocaust, 43 per cent of them in the Soviet interior. Some two-thirds of them were 35 years old or younger at war's end.¹⁵ While the primary aim of former Vilne partisans and cultural figures was to get Vilne's cultural assets to safety and to keep communal remembrance alive, for the majority of the (mostly younger) survivors, the most important thing was not to remain mired in the traumatic past, but to shape their own present and future.

After the July 1946 pogrom in Kielce, Jews in Poland began to flee to the West en masse. Most of the Vilne Jews ended up in "displaced persons" camps on German territory. But unlike, for example, survivors from Kaunas¹⁶ the Jews of Vilne did not engage in any noteworthy cultural activity during their time in Germany, nor were they politically active in any significant way within the survivor community. The reasons for this include the late arrival of the Vilne Jews,¹⁷ the dispersal of the group over numerous DP camps in northern Hesse and southern Bavaria,¹⁸ and the fact that their main leaders and cultural figures – those responsible for the community's cohesion in Vilnius and Łódź – had gone to Paris instead of Germany meant that, during the DP period.

By the end of the 1940s, the majority of Vilne Jews had emigrated to Israel and the United States (approximately 1,200 people each). Others settled in Canada, Central and South America, South Africa, and Australia. A few remained in Vilnius or Poland.¹⁹ While Vilne *landsmanshafn* had existed in the United States and Palestine since before the Second World War, during the 1950s, the Vilne survivors set up new

¹⁵ Leyzer Ran, "Di sheyres-hapleyte fun Vilne un umgegn. Bamerkungen tsu der ershter reshime", in Ran and Korisky, *Bleter vegn Vilne*, pp. 75–77. For the data, see the appendix "Reshime fun lebngelibene yidn fun Vilne un umgegn" in *ibid.* The survivors from Vilne are listed on pp. 1–27, those from the surrounding area, pp. 28–36. The census period ran from May 1946 to September 1946. A supplementary list of names registered between September 1946 and June 1947 can be found on p. 37. Lists containing the names of survivors living in other countries are on pp. 38–41. In addition to the name, age, place of birth, and information on surviving family members, the lists include occupation, former address in Vilne, and location during the war. As a result, we today have a comprehensive overview of the social structure of the Vilne Jews in Poland between 1946 and 1947.

¹⁶ For more on this, see the contribution by Tamara Lewinsky, "Kultur in Transit. Osteuropäische-jüdische Displaced Persons", *Impulse für Europa. Tradition und Moderne der Juden Osteuropas* [= OSTEUROPA 8-10/2008], pp. 265–278.

¹⁷ Relatively few Vilne Jews were to be found among the Jewish DPs on German territory immediately after the war, as the Nazis had murdered the vast majority of them in 1941.

¹⁸ Archiv Bet Lohahei Hagetaot, file 2,899, Caitwajlike Reszime fun Wilner in Dajczland (1947).

¹⁹ These figures are based on the estimates of my interview partners, the statistics of several Vilne *landsmanshafn*, and the Meed Holocaust Survivor Registry at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington. After the second Soviet-Polish repatriation treaty, 1,000–2,000 more Vilne Jews who had been deported to the interior of Soviet Union in prior to the German invasion managed to immigrate to Israel via Poland in 1956–1957. At most, 5,000–5,500 Vilne Jews can be assumed to have survived the Holocaust.

ones in both places, as well as in all other countries where they settled. For decades, they engaged in communal memorial work, something that remained forbidden in Soviet Vilnius until 1990-1991. This resulted in several exhibitions, numerous publications, and countless events dedicated to the city's Jewish history.

In the United States, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which had been founded in Vilne in 1925 and transferred to New York in 1940, became the main point of contact for survivors from Vilne. The first official commemoration (*haskore*) in memory of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto in 1943 was held by a small group at YIVO on 22 September 1947. YIVO Director Max Weinreich opened the event with the following words: "Today's meeting should be like a gathering of children, meeting on the anniversary of the death [*yortsayt*] of their mother.... This evening, the closest family has come together."²⁰

Despite the mourning, it was also important to Weinreich to show continuity. He pointed out that YIVO was a "Vilne institution that has put down roots in New York and has remained a Vilne institution."²¹ Weinreich went on to say that the YIVO archive already contained more material on Vilne than those who had been in the ghetto could ever have imagined. He urged all those present to let his colleagues record their memories of the time before and during the war and called on the survivors to vow to "do his or her utmost... to build Vilne anew throughout the world."²²

YIVO became not only the most important repository of those fragments of the Vilne lifeworld that had been rescued from destruction and of evidence from the German occupation; with its Yiddishist agenda, YIVO embodied, like no other institution, the cultural milieu in which the Jews of Vilne felt at home. In 1953, the cultural association Nusach Vilne was founded on the tenth anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto. Its memorial activities and projects remain to this day closely connected with YIVO. Here, the three-volume photo album *The Jerusalem of Lithuania: Illustrated and Documented (Yerushalayim deLita in vort un bild)* by Leyzer Ran deserves special mention. It was published in 1974 in response to a 1953 architectural history of Vilnius that failed to say a single word about the city's Jewish dimension.²³ In addition to running photographs from the YIVO Archive, Ran painstakingly collected private photographs from more than 260 Vilne Jews from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Great Britain, Holland, Israel, Canada, Cuba, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, Uruguay, and the United States and combined them in a multifaceted visual history of Jewish Vilne.²⁴

Even if the efforts of Nusach Vilne to install a permanent exhibition at YIVO failed in the 1950s, the association's members were very involved in the large exhibition "Vilna. A Jewish Community in Times of Glory and in Time of Destruction", which YIVO

²⁰ Yortsayt denotes the first anniversary of a burial, but in subsequent years is observed not on the date of burial, but on the date of death (according to the Jewish calendar). After the Holocaust, this rite was often transposed onto whole communities. For Weinreich's speech, see YIVO Archives, RG 123, Friends of Vilna Collection, box 23, folder 10, folio 1 "Ovnt tsum yortsayt fun Vilner geto" (22 September 1947), speech by Max Weinreich, manuscript.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²³ J. Grigienė and A. Berman, eds., *Vilnius: Achitektūra iki XX amžiaus pradžios* (Vilnius 1953).

²⁴ Leyzer Ran, *Yerushalayim deLite. Ilustrirt un dokumentirt*, 1-3 (New York 1974); Anna Lipphardt, "The Post-Holocaust Reconstruction of Vilne, 'the Most Yiddish City in the World' in New York, Israel and Vilnius", *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2004), pp. 167-192, here pp. 175-178.

hosted in the spring of 1960. While Nusach Vilne went on to work with the Vilne landsmanshaft in Israel to create a permanent exhibition at the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, the association in New York succeeded in creating a modest exhibition at the YIVO offices only in 2002. Before Nusach Vilne officially disbanded in the summer of 2004, it arranged for an Annual Nusach Vilne Memorial Lecture to be held at YIVO every year on 23 September to commemorate the liquidation of the ghetto – even beyond the point when there are no longer any Vilne Jews alive.

In Israel, by contrast, long-term planned memorial projects began only in the mid-1960s. Before that, personal and financial resources were used above all to integrate the Vilne Jews into their new homeland. In 1966, Itzhak Zuckerman, a Vilne native and one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, encouraged the museum at the Ghetto Fighter's Kibbutz to add a permanent exhibition on Jewish Vilne as the spiritual centre of the Diaspora. To this end, the Vilne community outside of Israel was to be mobilised. That same year, the Vilna Memorial Fund Committees that had been created by Nusach Vilne in New York and its counterpart in Israel (*Irgud Yotse Vilnah ve-Hasvivah*) began raising money, planning content, and acquiring objects for the exhibition. In the course of preparations, there were repeated conflicts over the direction content was taking, which were usually sparked by differing assessments of the Diaspora experience. But on 3 September 1972, the 29th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto (which is observed in Israel according to the Jewish calendar), the exhibition was opened in a ceremony attended by several thousand people, including high-ranking Israeli politicians.²⁵ Until the start of renovation work at the museum in late 2005, the exhibition was visited by more than 10,000 people per year, including Israeli school groups, members of youth organisations, and army recruits. Vilne does not appear in the museum's new concept.

Vilne-related memorial and cultural activities in New York were of a high quality, but were accessible to only a small group due to the almost exclusive use of Yiddish. The Vilne community in Israel, by contrast, managed to communicate better with the younger generation through bilingual projects. In 1968, the local association of Vilne Jews in Haifa noted:

The most important issue... that our association has dealt with in all its years is the question of how to perpetuate remembrance of our Yerushalayim deLita. We have discussed the issue in countless sessions, and eventually came to the conclusion that the very first thing we had to do was to find a way to our young people, in order to instil in them a love for all the values that were cultivated by the Vilne Jews over the course of generations.²⁶

The aim of instilling in younger Israelis a love for the values of a Diaspora community (let alone *the* Diaspora community that bore such honorary titles as *Yerushalayim deLita*, *goles-Yerushalayim* [Jerusalem of the Diaspora], and *kroynshtot fun Yidishland* [capital of Yiddishland]) stood in stark contrast to the basic understanding of Zionism and Israeli national doctrine, which deplored the Diaspora as worthless,

²⁵ For more on this see Lipphardt, "The Post-Holocaust Reconstruction of Vilne", pp. 178–187; idem, "Dos amolike yidische geto. Blick auf das jüdische Viertel in Vilne", *Simon Dubnow Jahrbuch 4* (2005), pp. 481–505, here pp. 499–501.

²⁶ "Der farband fun Vilner in Haifa", in *Vilner Pinkas*, 1 (July-August 1968), p. 32.

corrupt, feeble, and cowardly. However, the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann – the logistical organiser of the Holocaust – had brought about a change in public attitudes towards the Holocaust, which ultimately also had an effect on the treatment of Jewish history in prewar Eastern Europe.

In the late 1960s, an “adoption” programme for destroyed Jewish communities was launched at kibbutz and public schools. The Vilne Jews were very proud of the fact that 13 schools opted for their city. Vilne was at the top of the list of adopted cities.²⁷ At the Lazarow School in the coastal town Hadera, the project was led by a schoolteacher named Zipora Abtilion. As a child, she had survived the Vilna ghetto with her mother. After liberation, she had decided to start over again from scratch and to forget the years of humiliation and persecution. At first, she did not find it easy to talk to the children:

I was scared to go back. I thought perhaps somebody more objective should tell them. I was afraid that I would arouse within the children sympathy for me, their teacher, instead of understanding. And above all, I did not want to hurt them.²⁸

For eight weeks, the entire school day of grade 6 was focused on the Vilne project. In class, the history of the Jewish community in Vilne was covered, from its beginnings, to its destruction. There were also working groups, which pupils organised on their own: One group collected material on Vilne; others prepared an exhibition, learned about Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, best known as the Gaon of Vilna, or asked survivors about their recollections. One pupil wrote a song of mourning about Ponary, where the Nazis murdered most of the Jewish population of Vilne. The project culminated in a commemoration ceremony, at which the pupils signed a declaration stating that it was their sacred duty to preserve the memory of Yerushalayim deLita. A commemorative plaque was put up in the school library. In an article about the project, Yiddish writer and Vilne native Abraham Karpinovitsch wrote:

It is made of tin with letters painted in black. However, the light that emanates from it cannot be found at any other memorial, even if it is hewn from marble and adorned with bronze lettering. Twelve- and thirteen-year-old children have put up this tombstone.²⁹

The tightly knit international network of Vilne survivors spanned five continents. It received considerable support from the active Vilne *landsmanshaftn* in New York and Israel as well as family ties. It even included the few compatriots who remained in Soviet Vilnius. However, for a long time, only family visits to Vilnius were allowed. For Israelis, even these were prohibited, because the Soviet Union had broken off diplomatic relations after the Six Day War (1967). American tourists usually got to see Vilnius only as part of official *Inturist* city tours. These were mostly very oppressive. Meetings with Jewish friends and relatives in Soviet Vilnius were arranged under extreme caution. A number of these family visits served other ends. For example, research for the

²⁷ Ibid.; Leybl Korski, “Shuln in Yisroel fareybikn Yerusholayim deLita”, in *Vilner Pinkas*, 3 (1969), p. 42.

²⁸ Quoted from Abraham Karpinovitch, “Di Viliye shtromt durkh Hadera”, in *Vilner Pinkas*, 4 (February 1970), pp. 40-41, here p. 40.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

aforementioned Vilne exhibition in Israel and for Josh Waletzky's documentary film *Partisans of Vilna* (1985) was carried out under the guise of such personal trips.³⁰

With the advent of Perestroika, but primarily after with the restoration of Lithuanian independence, hundreds of Vilne Jews returned to their old hometown for a visit. They wanted to use their last chance, before travelling became too arduous for them. They frequently took along their children and grandchildren. Although the former Vilne Jews had maintained a great emotional attachment to their hometown over all those years and across vast distances, direct contact with the city proved extremely difficult. In the meantime, 80 per cent of the population was made up of ethnic Lithuanians who had moved to Vilnius after the war, mostly from the provinces. For them, Vilnius was the historical capital of Lithuania. They had no idea of the city's prewar Polish-Jewish character, nor did the city's new Lithuanian and former Jewish inhabitants share a common language. Their former Polish neighbours had likewise left the city after the war.

With few exceptions, the Vilnius Jewish community, which was officially re-founded in 1991, consisted of people who had moved there after the Second World War. Thus, the city's current and former Jewish inhabitants had no immediate common past to connect them. Furthermore, there were disagreements over relations with the Lithuanian state as well as substantial conflicts of interest pertaining to tangible issues of cultural policy.

One especially tense conflict concerned the political and legal tug-of-war over several cubic metres of YIVO material that had been presumed lost. During the Stalinist persecution, these had been hidden by Antanas Ulpis, then director of the *Book Palace* (*Knygy Rūmai*), so as to keep them out of the hands of the censors. They were re-discovered only at the end of the 1980s. A basic question now arose: Who was the legal heir of this cultural treasure? YIVO in New York or the Jewish community in Vilnius? YIVO, which was supported by the Vilne *landsmanshaftn*, saw itself as the legal successor of the Vilne YIVO, a position that corresponds to international legal practice.

By contrast, Jewish Vilnius was divided. Since Perestroika, great efforts had been made to re-discover, highlight, and integrate Lithuania's Jewish past. A number of eminent Jewish intellectuals of the older generation grouped around the renowned writer Grigorii Kanovich, then the head of the Jewish community, endorsed the transfer to New York. This contradicted the interests of the newly founded State Jewish Museum under Emanuel Zingeris. The museum its main tasks to include collecting Lithuania's Jewish cultural heritage, which had been expropriated and taken away, and making it accessible to the public in the form of a centre for Lithuanian-Jewish studies.

Lithuanian archive directors and politicians also suddenly discovered that the country's Jewish cultural heritage was an integral part of Lithuanian culture. They were unwilling to let these materials go to the United States too easily – or at least not too cheaply. One high-ranking Lithuanian politician even asked whether it was not time to bring YIVO back to Vilnius now that Lithuania was once again an independent and democratic country.

³⁰ Author's interview with Josh Waletzky, Camp Yidish Vokh (Berkshire Hills, NY, 28 August 2001). The film "Partisans of Vilna. Documentary", director Josh Waletzky, producer Aviva Kempner (New York 1986), is available on DVD.

These interest groups repeatedly prevented the ratification of signed contracts securing the transfer of the materials to New York, providing for their microfilming, and offering a complete set of microfilms and extensive technical support to the Lithuanian archival system.³¹ Only in 1995 was an agreement signed and implemented. Over the next four years, all of the documents were sent to New York, where they were restored by experts and microfilmed. The originals were then sent back to Vilnius.

Closing Remarks

One of the most inaccurate conclusions drawn about the effects of the Holocaust is that survivors kept quiet about their past for decades. The example of Vilne's Jews shows that survivors were only too willing to speak. But for a long time nobody was interested in what they had to say. The Vilne Jews are just one of hundreds of *landsmanshaftn* scattered across the globe, even if one of the most productive ones.

The small window of time left in Eastern Europe for asking questions, talking, and listening, for exchange between Jews and non-Jews is going to close in the near future: Now, when it is finally once again possible in Eastern Europe to learn more about the Jewish past, and when there is a sincere willingness in many places to do so, the lives of the last survivors are coming to an end. What remains of the Jewish past, alongside the authentic places of remembrance in Eastern Europe, are the thousands of personal memoirs and survivor accounts that have been compiled in the past decades, numerous exhibitions, memorial books, documents, and collections, which the Jewish *landsmanshaftn* used to keep alive the memory of their home communities.

Researchers who look for information beyond what is available in Eastern Europe and instead set out in search of these fragments, which are strewn around the world in unspoken languages, will find not only valuable source material for the study of East European Jewish history. Those who make the effort will find a complex and often contradictory picture of East European Jewry that has little in common with the image reflected in the smooth, polished surfaces of national Holocaust memorials and commemoration ceremonies. They will also find something else that often gets lost in the contemporary, often depressing debates that surround this difficult chapter of shared history: an idea of just how much these people loved their East European hometowns and villages – despite everything.

³¹ This information is based on a series of interviews with the former YIVO Director Sam Norich, who led the negotiations until 1992 (15 November 2002) and his successor Carl Rheins, who brought them to a conclusion (23 May, 2 June, 11 June 2003) as well as numerous informal conversations the author had in Vilnius, while working in Emanuel Zingeris's parliamentary office from 1993 to 1994 and at the Jewish Museum. See also Zachary Baker, Pearl Berger, Herbert Zafren, *Vilnius Judaica. Still Portrait – Dynamic Reality. Report of the CARLJS Delegation on its survey of 'Judaica' in Vilnius (19-26 March 1997)*, pp. 10–11, and Marek Web, "Lithuania Reluctant to Allow Microfilming of Jewish Documents", in *Avotaynu*, VIII, 4 (1992), pp. 3–6.