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Everything Speaks:
The Jewish Lithuanian Experience through
People, Places and Objects

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Doctor of Philosophy (History)

University of Sussex

January 2013

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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Doctor of Philosophy, subject History
Everything Speaks:
The Jewish Lithuanian Experience Through People, Places and Objects

SUMMARY

Once regarded as a vibrant centre of intellectual, cultural and spiritual Jewish life, Lithuania was home to 240,000 Jews prior to the Nazi invasion of 1941. By war's end, less than 20,000 remained. Today, 4,000 Jews reside there, among them 108 survivors from the camps and ghettos and a further 70 from the Partisans and Red Army. Against a backdrop of ongoing Holocaust denial and a recent surge in anti-Semitic sentiment, this thesis presents the history and experiences of a group of elderly survivors in modern-day Vilnius through the lens of their stories and memories, their special places and their biographical objects. Incorporating interdisciplinary elements of cultural anthropology, social geography, psychology, narrative and sensory ethnography, it is informed, at its core, by an overtly spiritual approach. Drawing on the essentially Hasidic belief that everything in the material world is imbued with sacred essence and that we, as human beings, have the capacity through our actions to release that essence, it explores the points of intersection where the individual and the collective collide, illuminating how history is lived from the inside. Glimpses of the personal, typically absent from the historical record, are afforded prominence here: a bottle of perfume tucked into a pocket before fleeing the ghetto, a silent promise made beside a mass grave, a pair of shoes fashioned from parachute material in the forest. By tapping the material for meaning, a more embodied, emplaced, experiential level of knowing, deeper and richer than that achieved through traditional life history (oral testimony and written documents) methods,

can emerge. In moving beyond words and gathering a *bricolage* of story, legend, artefact, document, monument and landscape, this research suggests a multidimensional historiography that is of particular relevance in grasping the lived reality of survivors in Lithuania where only the faintest traces of a once thriving Jewish heritage now remain.

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Foreword

On the evening of January 6th, 2007, I received the call. Earlier that day, my father, Solomon Woolfson, had been taken to the hospital for observation. At the time he had not spoken to me for five years, on account of a memoir I published in 2002 which he felt portrayed him and his second wife (my step-mother) in an unflattering light. He vowed then that 'I would never see him again, not even on his deathbed.' Despite multiple apologies he had not relented, although we had begun several weeks earlier, at last, to communicate by email. I had been hopeful.

The following morning, my brother Saul assured me that our father had received the all-clear and returned home. An hour later, propped up in bed for a rare 'duvet day,' he passed away. I packed a small bag, caught a taxi to Gatwick, and a flight home to Dublin in a series of movements that passed in a blur. I arrived at Saul's house at midnight and found him in his front garden, sobbing as he tried to rip a tear in his best suit jacket. A short while later, my younger siblings David and Rachel arrived, marking the first time we had all gathered in the same place at the same time in years. One thought gripped hold of me: I have to see his body.

My father, by then, was in the hospital morgue awaiting an autopsy the following morning. As in Jewish Law, a body must be guarded from the moment of death until it enters the earth (and family members are not permitted inside the morgue), a representative of the *Chevre Kedushe* (Burial Society) had arranged to sit with him through the night. Seeing him one last time did not present itself as a possibility.

At around three A.M., David drove home. As he sped along the highway, a few hundred yards from the hospital in which our father's body lay, something called to him... a sound, a feeling, a presence. He doubled back to the hospital and found the director of the morgue, who informed him that "the man from the Burial Society" had gone to wash and change and that although "highly irregular," if we were quick, we could come and sit with the body for a short while.

The room was ice cold, like a freezer. He lay on a stretcher in the centre, his face more graceful, more poised than I had ever witnessed, his mouth set almost in a half smile. We sat, the four of us, in a surreal silence, hovering in an in-between space, not life, but not death either. One by one, we rose, ventured towards him, and spoke – with words, without words. When it came to my turn, I asked him again to forgive me. And as I watched him I promised that somehow I would make good on the past, convert it into something beautiful, in his name, in his honour.

Just over a year later, I received the second phone call, again from Saul. A young Hasidic Rabbi had been summoned, that afternoon, to recite the *Kaddish* (mourning prayer) at the bedside of a dying Jewish woman by her non-Jewish partner of 40 years and their five children. Later that evening, he phoned Saul, a human rights lawyer, to check on the progress of a case and mentioned, in passing, that he had spent the afternoon with a woman named Jacqueline Marley. Was she, by chance, a relation? She's my mother," Saul told him. And then he phoned me.

I hadn't spoken to my mother for seven years, again on account of the published memoir. The letters I sent her over the years had been returned unanswered. All I knew was that she had spent the past decade bed-bound with Multiple Sclerosis. Once again I packed a small bag and made my way home to Dublin. When I finally arrived at her

bedside the following day, she looked up at me, focused, intent, and asked in that deep guttural voice of hers: “So what took you so bloody long?”

Against every medical prediction, my mother pulled through that dance with death, and several subsequent ones. Over the next five months I spent many hours at her bedside – stroking her hands, feeding her, rubbing her feet with oils – and through all of these small, intimate actions, she remembered... the places and the people she had left behind, in particular my father. On one occasion, she told me that she had never forgiven herself for leaving him, for leaving us. Those days at her side were double-edged. I experienced them as a healing, both for her and for myself in a manner that had not been possible with my father, but I realized also as I listened to her gasping for breath and watched as they suctioned her lungs, and her eyes screamed up at me in terror, that to have her back was to lose her all over again.

In late February 2008, on the one night I was back in London to collect clean clothes and see my partner, I received an invitation from the Vilnius-based Professor of Yiddish, Dovid Katz, to a talk at the Rothschild Foundation on Lithuanian Jewry. I had already identified the experiences of this group as a possible Phd topic based on readings around the Pale of Settlement for my Master's thesis, but more so on account of my father's geographic links to the region and my desire to make, on his behalf, the journey homeward that he had long planned but never found the time for. While alive, he sought to steer me at every turn in the direction of my Jewish roots and I had, just as stubbornly, rebuffed his every attempt. Since his death, I had focused on little else.

Katz's discussion of what he termed “state-financed obfuscation of the Holocaust” in Lithuania included a slideshow presentation of elderly Jewish survivors still residing in Vilnius. Watching their projected faces – this one beside a partisan fort in the forest where she hid during the war, another outside Vilnius' only remaining

synaogue, another walking the streets of her former *shtetl* desperate for familiar markers – I had the inescapable sense that they were calling to me. I left the seminar possessed of the notion that I should travel to Vilnius to meet these individuals and to invite them to share their stories and memories with me. In the process, I hoped to uncover the living imprints of the country's once thriving Jewish presence and my own ancestral heritage.

Sitting with my mother the following morning, listening to her travel the same ground over and over in her memory, I became aware of the very real need of individuals at the end of their lives for closure, for completion, for a restoration of the self to a condition of wholeness before departing. Those hours at her bedside, I realize now, gathered in me, fertilizing the ground, making ready the internal spaces in preparation for the project ahead, just as they did for her. Her journey ended in June 2008, a year and a half after my father. In her final hours, she told all of us gathered about her bed, her nine children from two marriages, our varied spouses, some of her 14 grandchildren and her partner of 40 years, “I did my best. I cannot do more.” We closed her eyes, straightened her arms and covered her body with a simple white sheet. Then we said the *Kaddish* again. To be buried as a Jew was her last request.

Today, my mother lies behind the high wall of the Glasnevin cemetery, the “eyesore” she always detested. Her gravestone is blank, devoid of her name and the Star of David which would mark her for posterity as a Jew. My father lies across the city in the Jewish cemetery; although his gravestone is black marble, polished and gleaming, with a gold Star of David, it is only a partial monument of remembrance, for on it there is no mention of us, the four siblings who make up his first family.

The most meaningful life research projects are those which intersect with and emanate from our own experiences, those whose inspirations come about through serendipitous encounters over which we have no control, but which nonetheless inform

and shape our self-identification as life history researchers (Cole & Knowles 2001: 57). The fated occurrences surrounding my parents' respective deaths, and the healing that I experienced in each, opened up in me a spiritual awareness: a space, like the hole in the ground into which a coffin might be sunk. With each action, each word, each shovel of earth, the hollow is filled in, the gaps removed. And although I cannot now re-inscribe their gravestones, this research into their roots, this vehicle of transmission for the elderly Lithuanian Jews to whom I was steered, is my response to grief, my gift to my parents.

Towards A Multidimensional Approach

Lithuania, long regarded as the once vibrant heart of Jewish intellectual, cultural and spiritual life, has carried a weight, in terms of its impact on world Jewry, disproportionate to its relatively small size. Before the Nazi invasion in 1941, the country was home to 240,000 Jews; six months later that number had been reduced by two thirds. By war's end, less than 20,000 remained, with Lithuania recording, at ninety-five per cent, proportionally among the highest massacre rates across Europe. The swiftness and extent of eradication were attributable, in part, to the active participation of local Lithuanian 'shaulisti' or shooters in the "marching, guarding, transporting, and shooting of the country's Jewish population" (Levinson 2006: 19). Today, less than 4,000 Jews reside there, among them 108 survivors from the camps and ghettos and a further 70 from the partisans and Red Army.

Like many of the Irish Jews among whom I was raised, my great-grandparents hailed from Akmene, a *shtetl* in northern Lithuania close to the Latvian border. In 2008, following the death of my parents, I conducted a series of research trips to Vilnius to explore what might have been for my ancestors had they not managed to escape the pogroms to Ireland in the early 1900s, and to discover what remained of its centuries-long Jewish heritage. From the survivor group, I met with 10 individuals (some of whom were presented at the Katz seminar) and asked them to share their stories and memories with me, to take me to the places and spaces that mattered most to them, and to show me biographical objects of special personal significance. In the following introductory section I will outline the conceptual framework through which I approached this task, that is the thinking behind why I elected to focus on *people*, *places* and *things* and the methodological practices through which it was carried out, while, at once, making a claim

for the inventiveness of the adopted approach as a unique contribution to an already crowded field: that of Holocaust study.

Although I had not intended to explicitly address the Holocaust in this research, it became clear, in my initial contact with the narrators, that the topic was unavoidable. Everything they had done and become since June 22, 1941, when the Einsatzgruppen launched Operation Barbarossa across Eastern Europe, was drenched in what they had left behind: their passions, their homes, their belongings, their identities, sometimes even their names. Each of those I met had lost most, if not all, of their family members to the *Shoah*. Spanish author Jorge Semprun, himself a survivor, has said, only those who survived can remember for “they alone know the smell of burning flesh and a day is coming when no one will actually remember this smell, it will be nothing more than a phrase, a literary reference, an idea of an odour. Odourless therefore” (in Forty and Küchler 1999: 6). That smell of burning flesh permeated every interview I conducted and every place I visited.

As the last Litvaks to come to maturity before the Holocaust, those with whom I met are among the only remaining living “carriers of a unique and precious cargo” (Myerhoff 2007: 29): the essence of pre-war Jewish Vilna of which so little now remains. W.G. Sebald, whose work repeatedly calls up the presence of the dead, laments the fact that the world is “as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on” (2002: 31). It was to capture how history is lived and experienced from the inside – to uncover those spaces in which the public and private lives of catastrophe intersect and to discover the material legacies of Jewish Vilna, embedded in its objects and places, before they are drained away – that I embarked on this journey.

When I first mentioned my intention of travelling to Vilnius, I was informed by others who had ventured on heritage journeys of their own: “Don't bother going. There's nothing there to find.” It is true that evidence of Lithuania's glorious Jewish past is hard to locate. Its former *shtetls*, once numbering in the thousands, are marked today, if at all, by overgrown cemeteries and massacre sites. Vilnius' 109 synagogues have been reduced to just one. Even in Vilnius' Museum of Genocide Victims, the only acknowledgement to specifically Jewish suffering is one small, partially obscured placard which gives estimates for the number of victims of both the Soviet *and* the Nazi occupations; 74,500 for the former and 'about 200,000 Jews' in the latter. There is no other mention.

This lack of acknowledgment is not confined to the museum. Evidence of Lithuania's obfuscating, sometimes hostile, stance toward the perpetuation of Holocaust memory abounds. Recent media attention has focused on the ongoing judicial inquiry into the wartime activities of Jewish anti-Nazi resistance fighters who joined the Soviet-led partisans in the forests. In March 2008, a neo-Nazi group, *chaperoned* by the police, paraded through central Vilnius chanting “Juden Raus” (Jews Out). A muted official response emerged only ten days later.



Figure 1. Displays of anti-Semitic sentiments, Vilnius.

Left: National Day March, Vilnius, 2008. Credit: Vidmantas Balkunas, Source, *Lietuvos Rytas*.
Right: Graffiti on Jewish Community Centre Wall, August 2008. Source, Katz 2010.

In August of that year, on the eve of *Tisha B'av*, when Jews worldwide commemorate the destruction of both the first and second temples, the Jewish Community Centre in Vilnius was defaced with swastikas and images of burning smokestacks. On more practical levels, the community's longstanding quest for restitution – the return of Jewish properties or a monetary sum in lieu of those properties – has languished unresolved through several successive parliaments which lag conspicuously behind their Eastern European neighbours in this regard. The contentious Prague Declaration, adopted on June 3, 2008, promoting the Double Genocide theory – the equation of Communist crimes with Nazi crimes – has gained much traction (Katz: 2011a). All the while, the mainstream media continues its high profile, overtly anti-Semitic campaign depicting Jews variously as money-grubbing, homosexual, Communist and anti-Lithuanian.



Human rights advocate Andrius Navickas pilloried after protesting to the press commission about the front page cartoon of the Jew and the Gay controlling the world; a caricature of his head was inserted on to this frequently circulated image.

Figure 2. Respublikas front page, 21 March 2009

Against this backdrop of Holocaust dismissal, overt anti-Semitism and attempts to open proceedings against former Jewish partisans, the remaining survivors in Lithuania edge towards death. For them it is important not only to remember the past, but to

transmit that past forward. The Polish author Gustawa Jarecka, writing from the Warsaw Ghetto, asserted: “When the pressure abates for just a moment we utter a cry. Its importance should not be underestimated. Many a time in history did such cries resound; for a long time they resounded in vain, and only much later did they produce an echo” (Kassow 2007: 6). Jarecka knew that the act of writing itself “will not help us,” yet found consolation in the fact that future generations might benefit from her words. The record, she said, must be “hurled like a stone under history's wheel in order to stop it” (7). Some weeks later, Jarecka and her two children were deported to Treblinka, and although she did not survive the “days of hell,” her words have (7). In Lithuania, that 'echo' is fast dissolving, threatening to become subsumed under competing nationalistic agendas. Thus, while a primary motivation behind this thesis was the exploration of my own ancestral links to the region, and the development of an experiential, inventive approach to researching the lives of others, it was also born of a desire to re-instate, however modestly, the Jewish experience into the national Lithuanian narrative. In such thwarted circumstances, how best to gather and present the materials?

A Spiritual Dimension

The Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi suggests that the modern historian does not simply come to replenish 'gaps in memory,' but rather to recover a total past in which no subject is unworthy of his interest, no artefact or document beneath his attention (Kassow 2007:11). How to draw down a total past where those who might speak it have been eliminated, their documents burned, their archives plundered, their gravestones robbed and re-used? Such conditions of erasure call for the deployment of a multidimensional approach, drawing on archaeological and anthropological tools, in addition to more

straightforward life history methods which depend largely on oral accounts and written records alone. This idea of history as a way of seeing that discards nothing coincided with my intention (based on my experiences around my parents' deaths) to add a spiritual dimension to Kenneth Plummer's call for research practices that encourage the creative, expressive and interpretive storytelling of lives (2001: 1). Given the research's natural location within a specifically Jewish context, the overarching approach I developed is informed, at its core, by the Hasidic belief that everything in the material world has its melody and meaning, that everything – stories, places and objects– speaks (Krutikov 2006: 6).

The Power of Story

In regard to the 'value of story,' I was drawn to cultural anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff's reading of Hasidic master Rabbi Nachum of Bratslav's teaching that when one speaks to one's fellow there "arises a simple light and a returning light," such that both teller and listener can "grow a soul"(2007: 35). Although such notions about the power of story to spark an alchemical reaction are born of an essentially Hasidic belief, they are by no means exclusive to studies of a Jewish dimension. In addressing the parameters of research practice, Pierre Bourdieu claimed that the interview itself could be considered "a spiritual exercise," wherein through a "forgetfulness of self" one could achieve an "intellectual love" for the respondent, facilitating for them an exceptional opportunity "to give vent with an extraordinary, expressive intensity, to experiences and thoughts long kept unsaid or repressed" (2006: 614). Robert Atkinson, who has written extensively on the gift of narrative, acknowledges that in the telling of stories we enter a sacred realm, wherein a reverence towards life is awakened in both those who express and those who receive (1995: 11). Eco-feminist author Susan Griffin describes the process thus: The one

who tells has to reach down into some deeper layers of self in order to retrieve the story. The one who hears takes the story in to a “place not visible or conscious to the mind, yet there. By such transmissions,” Griffin claims, “consciousness is woven” (1992: 178). Author James Carroll similarly suggests that we tell stories because they fill the silence death imposes, because they save us” (in Baldwin 2005: 222). For writer John Berger those who tell and listen to stories see everything as through a lens. This lens is the secret of narration, ground anew in every story, ground between the temporal and the timeless. In our brief mortal lives, he reminds us, we are all grinders of these lenses (1984: 31).

The kind of sacred encounters that Bourdieu, Atkinson, Griffin, Carroll, Berger and Myerhoff invoke have the propensity to occur whenever there is a narrative interaction but are even more likely when the speaker is elderly, where the process of looking back is set in motion by the act of looking forward towards death (Butler 1963: 67). Older people strive for reconciliation and integration; they long for the healing of memories (Jewell 2004: 21) and to make 'final' and 'ultimate' sense (MacKinlay 2004: 77) of their time on earth. This becomes even more pertinent when those in question are survivors of unspeakable horror. For them, storytelling constitutes an almost existential, vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency (however belated) in the face of devastatingly disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in total passivity, but to actively rework reality and make it bearable (Jackson 2006: 15): the sorrows borne, through the sorrows told. But if it is true that survivors recount to integrate, to bring order to their worlds, to situate themselves in personal, familial and historical contexts, to confess or for any number of reasons – more than that, they recount so as to be heard (Greenspan 1998: xx). They speak to transcend silence, to rescue their lives from invisibility and if there was no one listening on the other side of the narrative bridge, survivors may not, in fact, speak at all. When I asked

one of the narrators if telling his story was cathartic in some way, he said: “for me, it does not change anything, but when you ask and if you listen, it means you care. It means that I matter to you. And that helps.” In the act of transmission then, a re-membered life is transformed into a “moral document,” the function of which is ultimately 'salvific' (Myerhoff 2007: 35).

The Inner Life of Things

As powerful as words, spoken or written, may be in the telling and redeeming of a life, they are not the only avenue available to the historian in understanding that life. The Jewish cultural historian Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, invoking the French archaeologist Oleg Grabar, refers to artefacts or material objects as “documents,” signs that point away from themselves towards something else, towards life (1998: 25). Cultural anthropologist Janet Hoskins found when researching the Kodi tribes in Indonesia that she obtained “more introspective, intimate and personal accounts of people's lives” when she asked them about objects and traced the path of those objects through their lives (1998: 2). In the sense that things can become both a metaphor for the self and a pivot for reflexivity and introspection, they enable a kind of self-historicizing that might otherwise prove absent. With the imminent passing of the last generation of Holocaust survivors coming into view, Jewish historian Marianne Hirsch argues urgently for an expanded understanding of 'testimony' and for the interrogation of the material remnants of the European Holocaust as clues to its “opaque and haunting past.” To the narrative accounts, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices we could, Hirsch contends “also add the bequest of personal possessions.” For anyone willing to subject them to informed and probing readings, these material deposits can serve as testimonial objects enabling us to focus crucial questions both about the past itself and how that past

comes down to us in the present” (2006: 355). Similarly, historian Leora Auslander argues for the expansion of the range of our canonical resources beyond words, highlighting, in particular, the importance of material culture as a potential source of meaning. Objects, she says, are not merely functional but are also always “modes of communication, memory cues, expressions of the psyche or extensions of the body.” They, like the people who use them, are embodied and as such become not only the products of history, but also active agents of history. In their “communicative, performative, emotive and expressive capacities, they act and have effects in the world” (2005: 1015-1016). In a similar manner, Jewish historian Jacob Neusner asserts that as excavators of the past, we must work from the surface that is known, through the detritus of the unknown, in quest of a material understanding of a reality that is not known but for its artefacts (1991: xv). And for Walter Benjamin, the collector, caressing his objects, is much like a sorcerer who squints through them into a distance called history, for history, he asserts, demands acts of data-recovery and the 'souvenirs' we recover help us to hold and tap lost experience (Leslie 1999: 119).

Such thinking calls forth the Diltheyan concept of testimony or expressions as “sensible objects that convey a spiritual meaning” that is manifestations of a mental content which they enable us to know (Owensby 1994: 146). These, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey offers, are signs and symbols which “gather together” and “fix” lived experience, and which may comprise gestures, facial expression and words, but can also include more permanent forms of expression such as works of art, architecture, written texts and personal objects. Such 'expressions,' according to Dilthey, provide the vessel for lived experience and organize, structure and preserve it so that it can be passed on and understood (Kepnes 1992: 9). Following Roland Barthes' notion of 'punctum,' it is also possible to read the testimonial object as a 'point of memory:' a space

of intersection between past and present, between individual and the larger collective and, in the Holocaust context, between life and death. For Barthes, the punctum would first announce itself as a minute detail in an image that only he might notice: a pearl necklace or a pair of lace-up shoes in a family photograph for instance, which held, for him, a personal connection. The sharpness of a point, he discovered, can pierce through layers of oblivion and fuzzy recall, and because the detail is miniscule, it is capable of conveying the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past that can come down to us in the present (Hirsch 2006: 358). Why was I, for example, given an amber pendant, a torn journal, a faded powder compact? Why these objects? The specificity of the lives there embedded and the social, collective experiences that they allude to became available to me only through tapping these objects for meaning. Because objects are charged with the psychic energy of those whose passions they express, whose purposes they enfold (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 24), they hold keys to understandings not present in words. Ideas around the capacity of material culture to hold and convey meaning are also found in the Hasidic teachings which suggest that during creation, God lost control of the process and sacred elements – sparks of his being— spilled from the delicate shells of light that encased them into the created, material world of matter below. There they became trapped, diminishing the being of God, thrusting the Jewish people on a path of exile and persecution. The righting of this wrong is, according to Hasidic teaching, the task of the Jews who, through the practice of *Tikkun Olam* – 'repairing the world' – (Dorff 2005: 7) can activate the sacred energy embedded in each material object, in each human action, releasing it back to its Creator (Potok 1991: xi). In this manner, everything – a song, a sunset, a stone, a flower – is thought to be imbued with the essence, the spark of the divine.

Speaking of the ways in which man experiences his world, the influential philosopher Martin Buber writes in his landmark text *I and Thou*: “Man travels over the surface of things and experiences them. He extracts knowledge about their constitution from them: he wins an experience from them. He experiences what belongs to the things” (2004: 12). And there is also something in this practice – of travelling over the surface of things and winning an experience from them – of Claude Levi Strauss' *bricoleur*: the rag-and-bone man who rifles through the ruins and rubble of the past, who plucks from its ashes the remnants and fragments of history, who fixes and recycles, rearranges and reconfigures, drawing from the bric-a-brac of experience new insights, new uses and new understandings (Levi-Strauss 1995: ix). It was such understandings that the potter Edmund De Waal sought as he sat with the collection of Japanese netsuke bequeathed to him by his beloved Uncle Iggie, convinced that these objects, which had passed through several generations of his family, held the secrets of their joys and their sorrows, and of the Holocaust which almost extinguished them. He writes:

I want to reach to the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in and what they felt about it, and thought about it – if they thought about it. I want to know what it has witnessed (2010: 15).

The Meaning of Place

In Vilnius however, it is not only people or their objects that can bear witness. There are seldom fixed or impermeable boundaries between the worlds of persons, ideas, animals, things, places such that ancestral homelands, family graves and dwellings, spoken words,

personal names, material possessions, spirit entities and significant others figure severally, equally, and actively, becoming indispensable parts of one's being (Jackson 2006: 66). This point is palpably made by the Greek Cypriot refugee who, when asked about his village, answered: "You ask me what is the essence of the village, if it's the fields and the houses which we've lost or the people, our fellow villagers. My answer is that it's the people and the houses and the fields - all together (Loizos 1981: 131). Because place is not "entitative but eventmental," something always in process, made and re-made by our interactions with it, just as we are 'made' by its impact on us (Casey 1997: 337), the natural landscape becomes a centre of meaning, its geographical features constituted in relation to our experiences of it (Creates 1997: 6).

While the Vilnius I encounter is a city which seems to have mislaid most of its narratives and become a "vacuous place, not unlike a museum except without any acknowledgement of its recent past" (Briedis 2008: 228), it is nonetheless a city alive and teeming with memory. There, the almost invisible traces of a Jewish presence lie dormant and untapped in countless physical spaces: in *Mezzuzahs* over doorways, in courtyards, in synagogues and cemeteries. More than anywhere else, they are in the earth. In her recent novel, *The Winter Vault*, Canadian author Anne Michaels asks the question: "how much of this earth is flesh? How many humans have been committed to her?" (2009: 22) Posed as a question, Michaels remarks later, the answer is too elusive. Perhaps, she says, it should simply remain a statement: how much of this earth is flesh. In Lithuania, a landscape where fragments of the dead abound – a nub of bone, a pile of ash, a particularly verdant patch of grass nourished by flesh – there is no innocent land. Even the most remote, forsaken stretches once seeped with Jewish blood. Myra Sklarew, an American poet of Litvak descent, acknowledges that it was during a visit to Lithuania that she learned that memory resides in physical space and that she could not be whole until

she had knelt in its cemeteries and “cleared the moss and the earth off the gravestones... touched the places of massacre, gathered the earth in my hands” (2003: 138).

Stones, trees and animals have a knowable past but no history, because no conscious purposes animate that past. While they may lack the motivating agencies of human history, the past they are capable of disclosing is nonetheless historical (Berlin 1976: 29). The one seeking such a buried past, Benjamin advocates, must conduct himself like “a man digging” returning again and again to the same matter, to “scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil” (2007: 1). Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley describe those in search of historical truths as archaeologists “picking over the skeletal remnants of a past society ... to see what is hidden in the distance” (1987: 6). It is through such small acts of retrieval – Sklarew's clearing of moss and earth, Benjamin's scattering of soil, Shanks and Tilley's picking over – that sites of history are transformed into sites of memory, through the will to remember, that otherwise inanimate, forgotten and inert streets, ruins, cemeteries and massacre pits become living embodiments of a memorial consciousness (Nora 1989: 12). In a country, the topography of which is saturated with death, where the act of murder is etched into the woodland's memory, the trees, the stones, the buildings, the earth are all silent witnesses to the past.

Beyond the Survivor Label

The decision to adopt a multidimensional approach focusing on *people, places* and *objects*, while born initially of Hasidic principles, was equally necessitated by the absence of written records, the inaccessibility of the archives and the historical amnesia that has beset Lithuanian national memory. But it also emerged from an understanding that while much has been achieved in the area of oral testimony with Holocaust survivors, such testimony is often limited to a bubble of experience surrounding the 'event,' the

teller reduced to the passive role of 'testifier,' to establish the accuracy or legitimacy of an account, even when they themselves have participated in the incident in question.

Researchers, in the process, run the risk of losing sight of the lives these individuals have managed to construct from the debris of history. While we rightly invest reverence in our attitude toward the ever diminishing survivor community, we must also be cognizant of the fact that the survivor label can sometimes obscure the individual behind it: the richness of who these people really are, the treasure of their individual pasts before 1941, and the courage with which they have created lives and families beyond their tragic history. Understanding and memory, asserted Emanuel Ringelblum, the creator of the famed *Oyneg Shabes* archive from the Warsaw ghetto, must focus not only on collective catastrophe but also on individual lives so as to keep the “a posteriori label of 'victim' from effacing who Jews were before the war” (Kassow 2007: 14) and, I would add, who they became after it. The specificity of these individual lives, their triumphs and tragedies, are embedded eternally inside the objects with which they surround themselves, imprinted indelibly on the physical spaces towards which they gravitate: a sinking fort in the forest, an abandoned cemetery, a small museum. The understandings secreted from these objects and places relate not only to their individual pasts and the daily rhythms and actions that constitute their current lives, but also to the collective of which they were once a part. To fully absorb those lives, I had to traverse the tangible three-dimensional spaces in which they have been enacted.

Moving Narratives

An early starting point for the kind of enquiry that I hoped to carry out surfaced in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* with its uninterrupted, hypnotic stretches of prose, its photos of tunnels and train stations, maps and skulls, doorways and beautiful landscapes. Sebald

describes his process as “taking a walking tour, finding something by the wayside, that thing leading to another... and you accumulate things, and it grows, and then you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials (Cuomo 2007: 94). Similarly, art historian Rebecca Solnit's concept of following the track or, 'shul' in Tibetan, of “a mark left after that which has made it has passed by” – a footprint, say, or a scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood (2006: 50) – emerged as a conceptual framework in which the research could sit. Instrumental also in the development of the adopted approach was cultural anthropologist Michael Jackson's discussion of the connections between storytelling and journeying. “To say that storytelling moves us, transports us, carries us away or helps us escape the oppressiveness of our real lives,” Jackson writes, “is to recognize that stories change our experiences of the way things are.” But stories, he claims, are not only like journeys because of the effects they have upon us; stories are often commonly and conspicuously about journeys (2006: 30). The narratives gathered in Vilnius are of flight, escape, exile, return, of circling over and around and back, stories of people who, even in death, are moved on from one place to the next. In modern Athens, Michel de Certeau writes, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. “To go to work or come home, one takes a – 'metaphor' – a bus or a train.” Stories, he insists, could also take this noble name; everyday they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them (1988: 115). In following the narrators' stories, I also travelled the '*metaphorai*' – carried on their memories into the bunkers and sewers of the ghetto, into forts clawed from the earth, into the *malinas* (hiding places) scratched out of crumbling walls and into the ruins of the centuries-old Jewish Vilna, interred underground. And if I travelled their worlds through what Dilthey refers to as “an empathy with the mental life of others” (Kepnes 1992: 9), I also journeyed physically – walking, climbing, trekking – alongside them in real-time

across their storied landscapes. Simultaneously, I travelled intra-personally, through the kind of 'growing of a soul' that Myerhoff and Griffin invoke, and intellectually as each story despatched me towards a new body of literature – psychogeography, sensory ethnography, cultural and museum studies – from one academic landscape to another.

Models of Inquiry

While the above attends largely to the conceptual lens through which this research was conceived, there were several practical models from which inspiration was drawn. The oldest of these emerges from the work of noted Yiddish writer S. An-sky who, in 1912, was commissioned to lead ethnographic expeditions into the Pale of Settlement on behalf of the Jewish Ethnographic Society in St. Petersburg. Throughout these sorties, designed to “preserve and record the artefacts of a culture in decline,” An-sky embraced the material and the spiritual in the form of folklore, myths, legend, gravestones, ancient synagogues, houses of the righteous, antiques, documents, ceremonial objects, and a host of fragments that spoke to the Jewish experience (An-sky 2003: xii). Similarly, YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research), established in Vilna in 1925 under the leadership of Max Weinrich, championed the “doing of history,” encouraging *zamlers* (collectors) to gather documents and artefacts, and commissioning youth and elders to write their autobiographies in the creation of an archive of Jewish cultural and social life (Kassow 2007: 9). Foreshadowing the Hasidic template that I would many years later set for myself, Weinrich once compared YIVO activity to that of a cabalist who “succeeded in drawing down the holy sparks out of the broken shells” (Kassow 2007: 81). In a similar vein, in 1939, the Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum started the famed *Oyneg Shabes* archive inside the Warsaw ghetto, commissioning individuals – from wealthy

businessmen to poor artisans, rabbis, Communists, and Yiddishists – to write on varied aspects of ghetto life, creating from a thousand testimonies a collective portrait (Kassow 2007: 145). When discovered in 1946, sequestered away in tin boxes beneath the ruins of the ghetto, this anthropology of the ghetto offered a rare glimpse into the 'alltagsgeschichte'- history of everyday life – of its inhabitants in the face of disaster.

Another model, deployed more recently by the Jewish historian Yaffa Eliach, was equally instructive. Eliach set out to write the “only major Hasidic collection to ever have been compiled from Holocaust experience” (1999: xxi). The tales that eventually appeared in her volume were culled from oral histories, conducted over a six-year period in the Borough of Brooklyn, home to the “largest concentration of Hasidic Holocaust survivors anywhere in the world” (xxii). In the process of extracting the raw material of the tale from the mass of the interview, Eliach sought to remain faithful to both the literary genre of the Hasidic tale as well as to the individual storyteller and the particular historical event in question. She found, in the process, that her tales fell naturally into four major categories and her book is organized accordingly: Ancestors/Faith, Friendship, The Spirit Alone and The Gates of Freedom. In devising my own interview structure, I found myself drawing on this four-pronged approach.

A less obvious but equally relevant model surfaces in the work of Canadian environmental artist Marlene Creates who, between 1989 and 1991, returned to her ancestral homeland, Newfoundland, to record a series of interviews with distant relatives, during which they expressed memories about themselves and the land on which they had been born. From these interactions, Creates created an installation, *Places of Presence, Newfoundland Kin and Ancestral Land*, featuring photographs of her relatives, excerpts from their transcripts, their hand-sketched memory maps, photographs of the landmarks

that Creates was directed to by their stories and maps and finally, a 'natural souvenir' that she collected when visiting these sites: stones, leaves, seaweed. These found objects, Creates suggests, are not mere representations of places of presence, but rather physical fragments which themselves contain the 'presence' of place and thus give material expression to her spiritual connection to the ancestral land of her kin (Schwartz 1997: 10). "When I listen to stories of my family's history," she writes in her artist's statement, "I sense that these stories come from a past that affects me. When I walk around the land, when I choose the stones from the shore, when I look at my notes and photographs, I feel a poetic inheritance that cuts across me as a woman and an artist" (Creates 1997: 5). Creates strolled across the land, her mother by her side, and together they called down the four generations of women that the land had passed to. Throughout my journey in Lithuania, I did not have an actual mother or father to physically accompany me along the edges of the massacre pits and into dusty archives, yet I carried their spirit with me, making, on their behalf, a final journey homeward.

Methodological Considerations

In trying to enter the inner world of author Joseph Roth and to match the Galician scenery his prose so vividly describes with the actual places which inspired it, Dennis Marks travelled to Roth's birthplace, to "construct a psycho-geography of the author, what German speakers call his *seelenlandschaft*, his spiritual landscape" (2011: 6). Creates' journey of discovery and the one I embarked on in Vilnius can both be considered psychogeographic excursions, in which people's stories are matched to the actual places in which they experience the events that they recall (Gibbons 2009: 100), their annotated responses to a designated place, recorded, their em-placed memories evoked. In line with

Creates' contention that experience charges landscapes with personal significance (1997: 16), social geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues that a place only achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind (1977: 18). By such emplaced engagement with the practices, experiences and identities of those I was seeking to understand – by joining one on a visit to the community centre where she sees out her 'last days,' another to the small museum where, she says, the faces of the dead “peer down on me, talk to me and give me hope” – I grasped the most “profound type of knowledge: that which cannot be spoken at all” (Pink 2009: 8).

The methods I have drawn on are also reflective of Elizabeth St. Pierre's process of 'nomadic inquiry,' which led her back to the land in Essex Country she had abandoned two decades earlier. There she discovered that some are born in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they left is the one they have been searching for (2000: 258). And some find themselves, far from their native land, suddenly at home. In each Vilnius abode that I entered, I was struck by the sensory resonance of the sounds, the smells, the sights and the tastes which returned me suddenly, unexpectedly to my grandmother's small house in Kimmage, Dublin. In the sense that I have used as a starting point my own biography, that my experiences, thoughts and responses are often incorporated into the description and analysis of that of others, this research takes its cues from methods of autoethnography, in which ethnography and autobiographical writing are merged (Chang 2008: 46).

Closely linked to this is the practice of reflexivity, whereby I have attempted to make transparent the ways in which my experiences, passions and preoccupations inform the processes and outcomes of inquiry (Etherington 2005: 31-32). The cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar takes this a step further in her groundbreaking text: *The*

Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart. The 'vulnerable observer,' she writes, is one who "has to invent her own borderland anthropology in poetry and myths and fictions because it does not exist within the academy" (1996: 174). Why, she asks, in a discipline which exists historically to 'give voice' is there no greater taboo than self-revelation (26). Her decision to write ethnography in a vulnerable way was occasioned by the regret she experienced at deciding to take on a fieldwork assignment on "the anthropology of death" when her beloved grandfather was actually dying of cancer on Miami Beach (35). In inscribing a double mourning – that of anthropologist writing of the deaths of a group of elderly men in a small Spanish town, and as granddaughter lamenting the passing of her beloved *Zeyde* – in interweaving her own story with that of her subjects, Behar achieves a text of heartbreaking intensity, all the more powerful for its transparent vulnerability. And as I listened to stories of train journeys into the unknown, of the death of parents, grandparents and children, I was aware, all the while, that I was inscribing my own double mourning.

The writing of history from the perspective of those approaching the end of their lives presents a way of extending those lives, all the more so in the case of Holocaust survivors (Behar: 79, Myerhoff 2007: 86). In gathering her Hasidic narratives, Eliach constantly sensed that the tale "entrusted to me was a living witness, a quivering soul, the painful spoken words a memorial to a family, to a mother, a father, brothers, sisters, the only testimony to their ever having existed on this blood-soaked earth" (1999: xxv). As recipients of survivor testimony, we cannot help but step into "the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence" (Laub 1992: 65), to sit there with the teller, who often has little left but his tale. In 'sitting' with my tellers, I was guided by Greenspan's discussion of recounting and listening with Holocaust survivors (1998), Laub's theory of testimony (1992), and Langer's psychological meditations on the mutilation of memory

by unspeakable experience (1991). But I was also informed by the Talmudic injunction of transmission 'eye to eye' and 'mouth to ear' (Wiesel 1970: 42), towards a listening encounter of embodied immediacy (Greenspan 1998: 27-28) and anthropologist Sarah Pink's concept of 'sensory ethnography,' in which the researcher comes to know the world of the researched through his/her whole experiencing body (2009: 24). Solnit utilized a similar process of sensory immersion during her 'migrations,' to situate the past in its locale, for she says: "it is the texture of life that is so often missing from accounts of the past— the size of a room, the height of a border wall, the rockiness of a landscape" (2011: 16). For Dilthey, this level of immersion came about through *nacherleben* – a state in which he not only empathized with those whose history he sought to understand, but actually re-created the mental state of the individual, travelling back to a discrete point in time and moving forward, through the arc of the narrative, alongside the author/teller (Kepnes 1992: 9). By such moving and re-experiencing, Dilthey suggests, we discover aspects of historical reality that are often not readily obvious, find continuity in the seemingly fragmentary and arrive at insights or conclusions that may not have existed in the mind of the author in the act of telling (10). For the lauded American historian Natalie Zemon Davis, the pursuit of a past is never a fixed undertaking but akin to an adventure in which the historian experiments with words, places and persons, "always shifting, moving" to bring the spectres of the past to life again in her imagination (Cruzet 2010: 7). Zemon-Davis' historical method is unique for its combination of rich imagination, creative energy and archival sleuthing; when confronted by gaps in available documentation, she is not averse to advancing her own speculations as to what 'might' have transpired for her subjects. As such the words "probably," "maybe," even the ironic "surely" make frequent appearances in her work (6). By honouring her "psychological contract" with the people she seeks to know, by thrusting herself into another place,

another culture, another language, by allowing the sources themselves to set her off on a journey of reflection and imagination, she enters a dialogue with her subjects and a liaison with the past that lies at the heart of her vocation as historian (22). I have sought something similar.

Methodological Practices

Thus far I have evoked a tangible, physical world of massacre pits, abandoned synagogues, overgrown cemeteries and multiple silenced spaces across the Lithuanian landscape, and also a private, more intimate world of memory and the things that populate it – the material links between individuals, their lost lives and their current preoccupations. I wanted to engage with those who could lay down both a 'before' and a 'now,' whose existences serve as an antidote to a memory of catastrophe which subsumes what had been into what had been destroyed (Kassow 2007: 14). What then were the practical steps undertaken to achieve this?

In June 2008, four months after the Katz lecture, I travelled to Vilnius and met with Lithuanian Holocaust historian Ruta Puisyte who agreed to assist in identifying candidates for interview. As Assistant Director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, she works closely with the Jewish Community Centre, and both institutions have strong connections with the survivor community. During that first reconnaissance mission, I met with four elders, three women and one man, all of whom agreed to be interviewed at a future date. Prior to the subsequent trip in September, Ruta emailed me detailed biographic data sheets on possible respondents. Some had previously been interviewed for the archive, *Needle In My Heart* (2003), relevant sections of which she forwarded to me. Others had never publicly shared their stories. Ultimately, the selection process was based on practical issues – who was healthy or emotionally robust enough or available on the day

in question – as well as historical issues, which related primarily to activities during the war and modes of escape, so as to present a cross-section of experiences. I ended up interviewing four men and six women: some who had been interned in the ghetto, others who had escaped to Russia, others who were children when war broke out, as well as second-and third-generation members from narrators' families, others of relevance to Vilnius' Jewish community, such as the Chief Rabbi and Director of the Jewish Community Centre, Jewish and Lithuanian historians, Lithuanian journalists, two government officials, and some young ethnic Lithuanians. While most of the interviews with the narrators were pre-arranged, one or two occurred through a casual interaction, as when a woman we had intended to visit was too ill and suggested a friend in her place.

Building on examples set by Myerhoff, Eliach and Creates, I devised a loose four-pronged interview guide focusing on: Ancestry, Biographical Object/Place, Historical Incident and Faith/Resilience/Legacy. These themes, I believed, would privilege highly particularized responses to the dehumanizing reality in which narrators found themselves, and, in turn, illuminate the vanished world of Jewish Vilna I sought to unearth, all the while foregrounding the 'everyday,' both past and current. I conceived the four-pronged guide as follows:

Ancestry: points to questions of legacy, what of their parents, grand-parents and great-grandparents had been handed down and clung to; what cultural, religious, social, educational and spiritual beliefs had they been exposed to; what meaning had they extracted from them; how long had their families resided in Lithuania, and what had been their experience of it.

Biographical Object/Place: points to the actual object/s/places that they shared with me or guided me towards – their provenance, topography, form, content, substance,

shape, size, inherent elements. Each object or place was 'read' for historical evidence and personal/collective meaning in much the same manner as the interviews themselves.

Historical Incident: This focused on an actual historical event that was closely linked to or reflected in the narrator's special object or place: a specific battle inscribed in a war medal; the moment of the liberation of the Vilna ghetto encoded in a rusty powder compact; traces of the Yiddish treasures of Jewish Vilna glimpsed in an invitation. The events in question were historically verified against archival sources, witness testimonies and texts/books/manuscripts.

Faith/Resilience/Legacy: The Hebrew word for soul, *Neshamah*, often used to describe the essence of a person or their truest self, actually translates as 'breath.' As there is no clear concept of soul as distinct from the physical body in the *Torah*, *Neshamah* has come to mean 'life-force' or 'animating spirit' (Green 2002: 21). The question of faith/resilience/legacy addresses how these individuals had kept theirs alive: what, if any, had been the role of spirituality/ Jewishness in sustaining their internal strength; who had been their angels; how did they now spend their days; what purposes/activities drew their attention; and what did they hope or imagine their legacies might be.

Israeli writer David Grossman asks similar questions in his essay *Individual Language and Mass Language*, in which he writes:

If I had been a Jew under the Nazi regime, in a death camp, what could I have done to save something of myself, of my selfhood, in a reality in which people were stripped not only of their clothes, but also their names...a reality in which people's previous lives were taken away, their friends, their professions, their loves, their talents... what was this thing that could preserve the human spark within me, in a reality aimed at extinguishing it? (2009: 75).

He explains that in Jewish tradition there is a legend that every person has a small bone located at the tip of the spine called the *luz*. Even if the entire human body is

shattered, crushed or burned, the *luz* does not perish. It stores a person's spark of uniqueness, the core of his selfhood. For some, the *luz* is art, creativity, for some, their family, and for others, a goal or purpose (77). I wanted to understand the *luz*, the essence or animating spirit that had carried and sustained each of these individuals, which would remain long after they had passed.

While these four areas provided the backdrop against which the interviews were conducted, the actual mode of questioning incorporated aspects of Gabriele Rosenthal's biographic method (2010: 8) as adopted by Tom Wengraf, which privileges individuals' "self-representations or life stories," that is what they elect to share and how they choose to share it, in an uninterrupted narrative of their own lives, in their own words on their own terms (2000: 141). Israeli psychologist Daniel Bar-On, also following Rosenthal, worked with families of both Holocaust survivors and Nazi perpetrators, and describes his method as opening the interview wide at the outset, for example – "Please tell me about your life story, starting wherever you would like" – then allowing the interviewees to narrate their own life stories undisturbed (2006: 29). Given these parameters, some of the narrators in Vilnius launched into chronological, step-by-step life stories, right through to the present day, while others started on the eve of war and ended their account on the day the war ended, and yet others started at early childhood and were unable to speak of the war in any depth at all. In the first interview (where there were more than one) or the first part of each interview (where there was only one), I generally allowed the narrator to lead me where he/she saw fit to go. In subsequent interviews or the second half where there was only one, I asked a series of tailored questions based on the four-pronged guide in conjunction with Atkinson's *Life Story Interview Method* (1998: 3) which has as its focus a search for "wholeness in a life." At the culmination of each interview I asked narrators to show or give me biographical items and to explain their

significance. They also, inevitably, shared various “accessories to the life story” (Plummer 2001: 48): photographs, personal documents, letters, diaries, writings, lists, all of which added dimension and context and aided in understanding their concrete social experiences in a more humanistic fashion (74). These, like the biographical items and the special places, were interrogated and analyzed for meaning in much the same way as the interview participants themselves, to ferret out the relationship of the storylines of the life told with the evidence of the life documented (Cole and Knowles: 2001: 87).

As part of the research inquiry focused on places of significance, where possible, I asked narrators to lead me on a psychogeographic tour of a 'special place' on a subsequent day. In some instances the 'special place' was a memorial one – the partisan forts in the forest, the cemetery, the massacre pit, a former *shtetl* – in others a place of work or volunteering – the Green House Museum, the Community Centre. In each case, the narrators animated these sites for me, recounting memories but also the ongoing significance of the place in the present. In many cases, it was during these visits to the 'special places,' in the embodied acts of walking, digging, handling, talking that I received the most relevant information not only about the past, but about narrators' current lives.

To capture the tangible three-dimensional worlds of the narrators, I drew from the work of visual narrative inquirers Bach, Pushor, Radly and Bell who use photo-narrative, photographic field texts, video-narrative and visual biography in the presentation of their research data (Bach 2007: 289-291). For life historians, Cole and Knowles, Creates' exhibition highlights the limitations of traditional, oral and text-based life history work. “What,” they inquire, “had she been able to tell about these Newfoundland folk that a life history researcher visiting these very same families and conducting interviews might not have told”? Her methods, they concede, allowed for a more thorough contextualization of the life lived, while giving space for her own intuitive responses to her subjects (Cole

& Knowles 2001: 59). Through her art-making, on a conceptual, visual and visceral level, Creates explores the territory where landscape, memory and identity converge, and each of her artistic clusters (photographs, text, souvenir, memory map) presents, simultaneously, several points of access to the relationship between the Newfoundland kin and their ancestral land.

Creates explores a world that contained her ancestors. I set out to find the track or 'shul' left behind by mine. The 'clusters' that I facilitated (which eventually formed a travelling exhibition entitled *Surviving History: Portraits from Vilna*) emerged as a series of visual biographies, which explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively.



Figure 3. Berl Glazer - Visual Biography

In fashioning these visual biographies, the narrators were photographed in their homes, in their 'special places,' and in their daily lives. Their biographical objects and life accessories were also photographed. All interviews and visits to actual places were video-taped. Each of the resulting 'visual biographies' consists of a 'composite personal

wallpaper,' comprised of: images supplied by the narrator; images taken of the narrator; images of archival research materials relating to their stories; video diaries; and memory boxes created by artists in response to the respective narrator's story in which their biographical objects are housed. Each of these artistic clusters is set beside biographical data about the narrator in question and an excerpt from their transcript. Combined this presents a visceral, intimate portrait of the individual, offering various points of entry into their story, inviting the viewer, through an interactive, interpretive process, behind the survivor label and the typical historical narrative with which we have become so familiar. In sorting through these materials, I discovered that the narrators fell quite naturally into three major categories: Mourners, Memory Bearers, and Creatives and the following chapters are arranged accordingly. Although all ten narrators inform the thesis, the main focus is on the six individuals raised in the geographic region which now makes up Lithuania, as opposed to those from Belarus, Ukraine or elsewhere.

The thesis, in how it was conceived and written, is a reflexive undertaking, threaded through with autoethnographic content, but it is also an “experiment in historiography” (Hinton 2010: 1), in that it is multidimensional in both form and content: content in that it focuses on people, places and things; advocates a spiritual approach to research; and draws down such a wide and interdisciplinary range of sources; and form because it has emerged as a series of loosely linked 'moving narratives,' sprinkled with visual clues which, combined, carry me as researcher (and hopefully the readers) towards unanticipated destinations both academically and personally. The writing up process has been strongly influenced by artist Marion Milner's journal practices. Following a visit to Greece, Milner found herself returning again and again to “certain objects, keepsakes, trophies that one brings back from holidays” and discovered that writing about the objects added to rather than detracted from their significance. Staring into “the cave of memory,”

she waited and slowly images began to crystallise...not of the famous buildings, shared sights or public experiences, but of small private moments that came “nuzzling into my thoughts and asking for attention” (1989: 1-2). Milner's beads of memory led her into an imaginative, spiritual chamber which enhanced her art-making practice and brought to her insights, not only about the trips, the 'beads' and the places in which she had collected them, but about life, art, spirit, play and the self. Similarly, social historian James Hinton describes his work *Nine Wartime Lives*, ultimately, as a sounding board for his own puzzles about the meaning of life, and admits that the way in which the stories have been framed reflects the “unresolved muddles of my own selfhood: nine biographies standing in, catlike, for the nine lives of the author” (2010: 200). Beyond that he seeks to celebrate, or at least acknowledge, the contributions that the nine diarists have made, “however modestly to molecular processes of change both in the intimate sphere and in the conduct of public life.” By paying attention to their self-fashioning, he says, “we may come closer to glimpsing those deeply personal processes from which history's vast impersonal forces are, in the end, constructed” (205).

Myerhoff sought something similar, albeit in different circumstances. Widely acknowledged as an early practitioner of narrative ethnography, her works present both researcher and researched together within single, multivocal texts. In the final section of *Number Our Days*, she invokes her Ukrainian-born grandmother, Sofie Mann, from whom she learned the value of stories:

As a child I was a notoriously bad eater, and Sofie took this as a personal challenge. We spent hours and months sitting in the breakfast nook in the kitchen of the house on Taylor Road in Cleveland, spread before us the special morsels that she prepared to tempt me. We looked out the windows together, past our yard to the houses on the hill. For each bite I took she gave us entry into one of those houses and told a different story each day, about the people who

lived inside...these accounts informed my entire life more than any teacher, book or country I later encountered. Sofie Mann, without her maiden name, without her own birthday, without education, undifferentiated from the stream of her people, Sofie knew and taught me that everyone had some story, every house held a life that could be penetrated and known if one took the trouble. Stories told to oneself or others transform the world. (1978: 240).

In my attempts to 'transform the world,' I have, from the materials gathered, produced an award-winning short documentary and created an exhibition which opened in Vilnius in 2009 and has since toured in the UK, Ireland, and across South Africa. Beyond these outcomes, in paying attention to the unique, inimitable and small ways in which individuals contribute to and make their own histories, even in a world designed to obliterate them, and to the ways in which they are bound to that world through object and place, I have sought to generate a historiography that draws together the scholarly and the sacred, the visual and the imagined, in a document where narrative sits beside poetry, where photographs of the ordinary meet those of the most sacred, where the everyday co-mingles with the centuries-old. Through the physically embodied acts of walking, digging, talking, listening, eating, dusting, holding, through gathering up snippets of stories, fragments of memory, myths and legends dating back centuries – an amber pendant here, an engraved silver spoon, there, a ragged archival document, or a charred book – from the flotsam and jetsam of history, a 'bricolage' has formed. It is this 'bricolage' that I offer up as my contribution, in the spirit of *Tikkun Olam*, to restoring and re-inserting, into the collective unconscious, the lived reality that is the Jewish Lithuanian experience.

An Historical Context

Before any act of re-insertion can occur it is first important to fill the vacuum from which these individuals' lives have emerged and to understand what it is that they remember and why. Yerushalmi alerts us to the fact that the injunction to remember – *zakhor* – makes an appearance 169 times in the Hebrew Bible. But, he asks, what kind of history have Jews valued, what of their pasts have they elected to remember and how has that past been preserved and transmitted (1996: xxxiii). In her evocation of *shtetl* life, author Eva Hoffman similarly inquires: “Why remember, to what end and in what way?” In the post-Holocaust era, she suggests, we have undertaken the obligation to remember as a sacred act, yet where merely recited or heeded without active understanding, the injunction never to forget can become “formulaic, an invitation or a ritual rather than to a moral act. How we remember, how much effort, pressure of intelligence and imagination we bring to the process also counts” (2007: 13). In *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey argues that memory is not simply something that sustains a '*status quo ante*' within human experience, but rather something that makes a critical difference to that experience, such that the act of remembering itself transforms one kind of experience into another. In being remembered an experience becomes a memory (2000: xxii). And while this thesis cannot claim to be a comprehensive historiography of the Jewish Lithuanian experience, it does seek to situate the narrators within the historical contexts that surfaced during the interviews as meaningful and of 'value' to *them*, a history that they have elected to 'preserve' and 'transmit' in their own words and on their own terms (Atkinson 2007: 233).

There are various points of entry into the narrators' stories throughout this thesis – through words, images, objects and places, and in this, the first of such instances, I have, from each interview, culled a phrase, born of an historical consciousness, which illuminates and foregrounds an aspect of the Jewish Lithuanian experience. These statements are presented in a call and response format: the call/phrase, answered by a short piece based on my readings and interpretations of relevant source materials which seek to elucidate the theme/event/circumstance raised by the statement. In the sense that real knowledge about the past rarely comes from its professional guardians (Eley 2005: 8) but rather from those who have experienced that past, the history that I present here is of the bottom-up rather than top-down variety. History from below opens the possibility of a richer synthesis of historical understanding (Sharpe 2001:33) and of culling the small, everyday experiences from the grander, more anonymous lens through which we typically view the themes of war and genocide. In stringing together a multiplicity of voices, I also embrace the view of history as a collective enterprise, one in which a community comes to life through the individuals who inhabit it (Kassow 2007:145).

Relationships between the here and now and the there and then are often best understood in terms of the 'microhistory,' a small scale, intimate, close-up view of a singular place which incorporates a careful delineation of particularities and details specific to that place (Brewar 2010: 2). This kind of reading appropriates landscape theorist Jay Appleton's two-tiered approach – prospect- refuge theory – to the interpretation of the environment, which can also be aptly applied to our understanding of the past. Historian John Brewar characterizes the former, prospect history, as that which is written from a single, superior point of view, in which an extensive, large-scale landscape is surveyed and analyzed. In this process, the viewer is not within the frame but

outside of it, peering down as if from a lofty peak, and because of the height, size and distance what is observed is general rather than specific, blurred rather than acute. The impact on the viewer, Brewar asserts, is the “pleasure of power,” a belief in the ability to shape history (2). In contrast, 'refuge' history, from the viewpoint of one who is immersed, hiding, seeking refuge in the world of which they speak or write, is close up and small scale. In this scenario, the speaker is the subject rather than the object of history, and the focus is on forms of interdependence, interiority and intimacy rather than on surface and distance. The pleasures of the refuge lie not in a sense of control over history but in a sense of belonging to history, of connectedness - to both persons and details – of the past. “Whether as the expression of a certain common humanity or as an identification with a particular group, this sort of history sees sympathy and understanding ... as essential to historical knowledge” (3). The refuge or microhistory, as presented here, thus seeks to avoid the exclusionary and univocal aspects associated with overarching historical narratives which can result in accounts that are abstract, faceless, and thus dehumanized. In his path-breaking work, *The Cheese and The Worms*, Carlo Ginzberg makes a claim for his narrow investigation of a solitary miller, stressing the importance of understanding the relevance that the ideas and beliefs of a single individual can bring to bear on his social world. In a modest individual, who is himself lacking in significance and for this very reason representative, Ginzberg argues, it is possible to trace, as in a microcosm, “the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period ...”(1992: xx).

Within the moments of history that the individuals I interviewed have held onto and now wish to press forward are revealed not only their personal relationships to the past, but also the social at the heart of the individual, the “impersonal beneath the

intimate, the universal buried deep within the most particular” (Bourdieu 1992: 44). From a series of highly particularized statements, a kaleidoscope of experience emerges — each statement a small bead, which, when co-joined, create a world. In this way, knowledge about the social, cultural, religious, educational and political realities of a community, all but wiped out, comes, however faintly, into view. Presented here then for each person is a history within a history, the very real world of flight, escape, exile, battle, death and hunger miniaturized by its containment within the orbit of a single individual's experience and, at the same time, magnified and multiplied by its significance to that individual and its broader resonance and interconnectedness to other individuals who occupied a similar place and time. My responses to these 'calls' echo Zemon-Davis' argument that in our attempts to explore and understand what might have been possible for a particular individual or group, we seek whatever evidence we can find, we draw on situations, mentalities and reactions analogous or close to those we are trying to understand (2010: 6). Thus the interview statements have been gauged against a broader backdrop of literature — first-person accounts, records, archival documents — and my own necessarily speculative interventions in the text, all of which seek to illuminate the incident in question. The statements that I have extracted are those which seemed particularly steeped in an historic awareness, and while these are presented more or less chronologically, from the first record of a Jewish presence in the area right up to the eve of the Nazi invasion, the events they depict, of necessity, sometimes overlap.

Rachel Kostanian – “So, we have long roots here.”



Figure 4. Rachel Kostanian at the Green House Museum.

I was born in a Jewish family in Sialiai with my parents, formerly Yiddish teachers, named Zivelchinki, my father's, and my mother's Danzig. I assumed having that name that they were expelled from Germany and came to Lithuania in the 14th or 15th century. So we have long roots here.

Rachel's ancestors were 'most likely' among the first Jews from Germany and surrounding countries to whom Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania extended an open invitation in 1323, offering tax exemptions, freedom of worship and religious tolerance in exchange for settling his land (Greenbaum 1995: 4; Levinson 1997: 17). The invitation set out this promise as follows:

They may come with their children, wives and cattle
they may arrive and take leave in accordance with their wishes
thus with this letter we guarantee and promise
that they will be safe and immune from the unlawful claims of my subjects.

(Levinson 1997: 17)

Although these privileges were later undermined with the merging of Poland and Lithuania and Lithuania's subsequent conversion to Christianity in 1386, they were

formally re-instated under Vytautas the Great, as evidenced by the first official reference to Jews in the annals of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the Charters of Witold, 1388 (Katz 2010a: 23). This formally granted Lithuania's Jews personal and religious security, tax exemptions for synagogues and cemeteries, freedom of transit and trade, and certain property rights. They could live where they wished, could work as artisans and craftsmen, and were absolved from repaying pledges on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. The charter further stipulated that Christians who were tardy in payment of interest to Jews would have to repay twice the sum owed. Any Christian found guilty of killing a Jew would have his property confiscated (Greenbaum 1995: 8-9). French-Belgian diplomat, Guilbert de Lannoy, travelling through Troki, near Vilna in 1414 described the town dwellers as: "Germans, Lithuanians and many Jews, and they all have their own languages" (Katz 2010a: 24). The reign of Vytautas the Great stands, even now, as a golden era for the Jews of Lithuania (Oshry 1995: v), and the charter, and its practical implementation, formed the basis of the political, legal, economic and social structures under which Jews would dwell for several centuries (Greenbaum 1995: 9) It was in such conditions that Rachel's ancestors made their home in a new region, a fact that becomes all the more poignant in light of the eventual fate of their progeny.

Dora Pilianskiene - "Symbols, marks, marks didn't survive."



Figure 5. Dora Pilianskiene at home.

I was born in the shtetl of Zeizmariai, between Vilnius and Kaunas on the road. And my father was born in the same township, even great-great-grandfather. All come from Zeizmariai. Of course you can find them in the cemetery. But symbols, marks, marks didn't survive.

Following the Union of Lublin, 1569, which fused Poland and Lithuania under one king and parliament, but which permitted Lithuania to retain its own army, laws and courts, large numbers of Polish nobles moved into the Lithuanian countryside. In response, a vast proliferation of small, Jewish market towns or *shtetls* materialized to service them (Schoenburg and Schoenburg 1991:13). Since that time the *shtetl* has emerged as an almost mythological construct, through which something of the form, content, texture and beauty of small town Jewish life in Eastern Europe as lived before World War I, and in many places, right up to World War II, has been preserved (Zborowski and Herzog 1952: 24). This evolving image of the *shtetl* has configured itself variously as: ghetto existence best left behind; Jewish body politic under siege; idealized Heimat; old country homeland arrested in time; paradise lost and finally, as the last staging ground for Jewish

martyrdom (Roskies 1999: 43). Dora's evocations of *shtetl* life and her searing lament at its erosion speak to all of these.



Market Day in Pilviškis.



Source: Kariv, 1967

Figure 6. Market days in the shtetl

The Jewish character of the *shtetl* was evident, even to the casual observer, with the gentile majority only making its presence felt on market days (45). Dora's ancestors, tailors and rabbis by trade, preservers and purveyors of Yiddish culture by persuasion, no doubt, formed part of the 'tribes of the poor,' described by Abraham Kariv, a former *shtetl*

dweller as: “Plain-working people ... that provided the necessities of life for the non-Jewish populations of town and countryside, miller, bakers, tailors, harness-makers, plasterers, glaziers, blacksmiths, wagon drivers and porters” (1967: 10). According to his biographer, David Assaf, the Yiddish memoirist Yekhezkel Kotik offers a more colourful depiction of the *shtetl* as a domain populated by a variegated cast of “kidnappers and tax collectors, communal strongmen, householders, rabbis and rebbes, leaseholders and innkeepers, merchants and simple folk, miracle workers and witches, scholars and ignoramuses, believers and freethinkers, informers and thieves, matchmakers and wedding jesters, teachers and melamdim” (2002: 16). In *Russian Life in Town and Country*, published in England in 1901, the social historian Francis Palmer paints a rather unsympathetic portrait of the *shtetl* Jew as someone who “once upon a time belonged to a higher class but had been brought down to the very lowest depths of degradation and poverty,” who “even in winter ... may be seen shuffling along the ill-paved streets, clutching the flaps of their flimsy, ragged, bottomless, black overcoats with nervous trembling hands across their breasts.” To the last, he writes, the “Jew clings to his black coat as a badge of vanished respectability” (1901: 127).

It is possible however, to read the black coat as a symbol of something else. Assaf argues that the *shtetl* was not so much a place as an experience, a state of mind “possessing not just physical reality but also a spiritual geography” (2002: 21). Kariv also emphasizes this component. “One had the feeling,” he writes, “that nature, indeed the very order of the universe, followed the Jewish calendar, where life was divided between home and the market place, sacred and profane” (1967: 12). In line with these depictions, Dora's portrayals centre around a resolutely religious family, her grandfather on one side “the rabbi of the township of Zeizmariai” and on the other, “a master tailor, a deeply religious man who read books in Hebrew and attended synagogue daily.” It is possible,

through Bella Lown's *Memoirs of My Life: A Personal History of a Lithuanian Shtetl* (1991) to re-imagine the real-life, day-to-day world of Dora's forebears.

Our house was the Rabbi's home...it could not exactly be called palatial. The entire house consisted of four small rooms, a dining room, a bedroom, a kitchen and a 'court room' lined with bookcases filled with books. In this room, father would sit day and night at his studies. Whenever people came for an adjudication, or with a question of law, they would always find him deeply absorbed in study. When we children asked him why he was always studying, he would answer 'The Torah is like a well, like a spring welling up. The more one draws from it, the more fresh water one finds' (4).

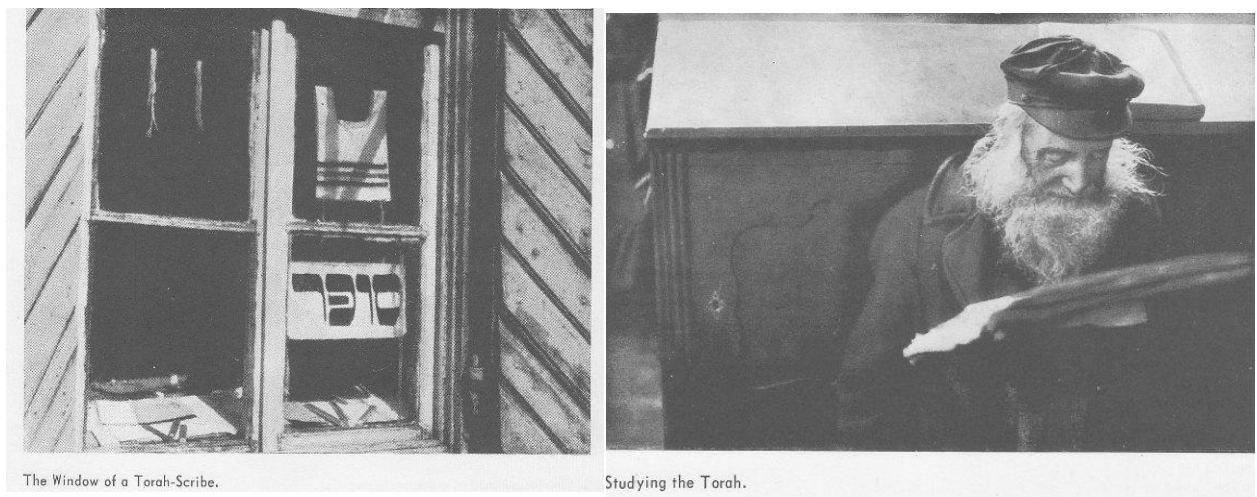


Figure 7. Spiritual life in the shtetl.

Source: Kariv, 1967

Aside from shared spiritual practices, *shtetl* natives were bound by their use of Yiddish, an *Ashkenazic* fusion of ancient spoken Hebrew, Aramaic and German dialects (Katz 2010a: 43). For *poshete yidn* or simple Jews, such as Dora's family, Yiddish represented far more than a means of communication; as an adaptive Diasporic language, it became an inherent component of the perpetuation of Jewish cultural autonomy wherever Jews found themselves in sufficient numbers and through which European Jewry fashioned a sense of nationhood, even while stateless (Wisse 2000: 166).

Cementing this sense of nationhood in the *shtetl* was the *Cahal* or community council, an institution dating back to the exile from Babylon, whose far-reaching authority extended to matters of food, family, religious practices, festivals, use of the *herem* (excommunication), status of women, minors, legal issues, and relations between Jews and non-Jews (Eliach 1998: 30). On a more domestic level, the *Cahal* was also responsible for the provision of extensive lists of garments or materials that were forbidden or deemed overly ostentatious. Dora's great-grandfather, grandfather and father, all itinerant master tailors, charged with the fabrication of “civil dress, military dress, wedding wear and even... the long black cloth for the priest” would have followed these prescriptions of attire assiduously.

Although the autonomous council represented in a single organization the Jews of all provinces, and this served to strengthen Jewish solidarity in a manner that might otherwise have proven elusive (Dawidowicz 1967: 8), *shtetl* Jews were by no means immune from attack. Frequently scapegoated on account of the most recent town fire, a dip in the economic circumstances of the peasants, the impact of political shifts and upheavals from afar, they suffered what might legitimately be termed the first Holocaust with the Cossack uprising of 1648. Led by *Hetmen* Bogdan Chmielnick (Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian army) in an attempt to liberate his native Ukraine from Polish rule, this set in motion an almost uninterrupted train of pogroms resulting in the slaughter of an estimated 200,000 to one million Jews (Sutton 2008: 27). An eyewitness to the massacres, Nathan-Note of Hanover later recorded the horrific nature of what he had witnessed:

Children were slaughtered in their mother's bosoms and torn apart like fish. They ripped up the bellies of pregnant women and took out the unborn babies and flung them in their faces. They tore open the bellies of some of them and placed a living

cat within the belly and left them alive thus, first cutting off their hands so that they would not be able to take the cat out...there was no unnatural death that they did not inflict upon them (in Eliach 1998:31).

Over the next century the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth would be partitioned on three separate occasions between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, as a result of which Poland ceased to exist as an independent nation (Schoenburg, Schoenburg 1991: 27). Eager to expand her territory, Empress Catherine of Russia seized vast tracts of land during these partitions, as a result of which Russia found itself home to the largest Jewish population in the world, a situation at odds with its longstanding anti-Jewish policy, which had prohibited Jews from residing there since the end of the fifteenth century (Eliach 1998: 36). The Pale of Settlement, decreed by Catherine on December 23, 1791, sought to remedy this dichotomy, restricting Jewish habitation to a specific area. By 1897, the Pale covered 386,100 square miles from the Baltic to the Black Sea with some 755,000 Jews residing in the Lithuanian section (Levin 2000 :77, Eliach 1998: 38). Successive Tsarist regimes – Paul I, Alexander I, and the 'Iron Tsar,' Nicholas I – followed along two tracks: the integration of Jews through enlightened absolutism on one hand and a hostile Christian attitude toward them on the other (Bartal 2002: 68). These, Eliach suggests were, at times, equally oppressive.

To be forced to give up their language, their educational institutions, their Talmud-centred curriculum, their form of self-government, in many cases their customary means of making a living (estate leasing, inn keeping, manufacture and sale of alcohol), their places of residence (the villages), and ultimately their religions, was a spiritual and cultural death as alarming to many Jews as the pogroms that were the sequelae of the regimes of a crueller, more explicitly anti-Semitic Tsars (1998: 45).

Eventually, Jews were excluded from inn-keeping, the sale of liquor and tobacco, barred from entering higher education, forced to pay double taxes, required to serve a mandatory twenty-five year military service and prevented from owning or leasing land. The most ominous chapter for *shtetl* Jews, under Tsarist rule, was the Cantonist period ushered in by Tsar Nicholas I (1825-1855) who abolished the option, which had prevailed under Catherine, for Jews to 'buy themselves out' of the mandatory twenty-five year military service. Each community or 'canton' was responsible for satisfying the military quota, as a result of which, writes historian Abraham Lewin: "Rich Jews protected their own children at the expense of the poor. They hired kidnappers or *khappers* to track down their prey and wrest them from the arms of their desperate and helpless parents" (Kassow 2007: 171). Kotik describes one such incident thus:

In Kamenets there were at the time three kidnappers. ...Their task was to kidnap eight- year-old boys and supply them as recruits to the army...the elders of our town had authorized the kidnappers to catch Yosef and none other. Yosef hid at our place for three weeks. But as ill luck would have it, the boy was so homesick for his mother that one day he sneaked out of the house into the street unnoticed and ran off in the direction of his mother's home. That was when Moshke pounced on him. ...the small boy was beaten almost unconscious and bound hand and foot, he was cast onto the wagon...the heartrending cries of mother and son could be heard all over the township and spread a devastating air throughout the community...(2002: 233-234) .

Children like Yosef, and many even younger, were *khapped* from their families and dispatched to military schools. At age eighteen, they were inducted into the army for a further twenty-five years of service (Levin 2000: 67). It is estimated that under such pressure, more than one half of the 70,000 Jewish Cantonists converted to Christianity between 1827 and 1854 (Sutton 2008: 31). Those who resisted baptism were treated as

martyrs to the faith, the most celebrated of which are possibly a group of boys who were gathered to undergo a public baptism in front of Tsar Nicholas himself in the *shtetl* of Kazan. When the Tsar gave the order for the young Cantonists to submerge themselves in the Volga river, they plunged beneath the water and did not rise, having made a prior pact to weight themselves with stones and to drown, rather than to surface baptized as Christians (Eliach 1998: 47). Of these boys, Lewin writes: “We should gather all the tears of the Jewish children of that time in one cup and put it alongside all the other cups overflowing with our blood and tears from previous persecutions. Our people should never forget its young martyrs” (in Kassow 2007: 171).

Respite from such hostile conditions seemed imminent when a slew of oppressive policies—the press-ganging of Jews without papers, restriction on Jewish habitation, the Cantonist law – were rescinded with the ascension to the throne of Alexander II who adopted a more liberal strategy towards the Jews than his predecessor (Levin 2000: 72). Tentative hopes of further concessions, however, were dashed by the appropriation of Jewish-owned land to the serfs whom Alexander II freed in 1861. Relieved of their traditional 'middleman' role, in addition to their land holdings, Jews abandoned rural areas and gravitated towards industry and manufacturing in the towns. There they joined the impoverished masses whose living conditions were aggravated by unemployment, cramped, substandard accommodations, the Great Famine and an outbreak of cholera (Greenbaum 1995: 185, Levin 2000: 73).

Whatever their deteriorating economic fortunes, it was Alexander II's assassination by revolutionaries, on his way home from a review of the Imperial Guards in 1881, and the Southern Tempests pogroms ignited in its wake, that dramatically turned the tide for *shtetl* Jews (Eliach 1998: 55). On the pretext that Jews were responsible for Alexander II's death, violence erupted in some 225 communities across the Pale resulted

in the beating, rape and murder of Jewish men, women and children, a situation compounded by the May Laws, instigated by Alexander III, a more reactionary leader than his father. These limited Jewish residence to a certain area of the Pale creating, in effect, a Pale within a Pale. Entire regions, towns and villages were renamed and borders redrawn with Jews, en masse, evicted from their homes (Greenbaum 1995: 186).

These circumstances – the assassination of Alexander II, the rash of pogroms unleashed in its wake, and The May Laws of 1882 – ruptured the landscape of Eastern European *shtetl* life, despatching bands of homeless wanderers, “haunted by hideous memory and gnawing fear” trekking across the continent in search of refuge (Eban 1932: 9), effecting the largest mass exodus to date, with Lithuania losing proportionally the highest number of Jewish inhabitants (Schoenburg, Schoenberg 1991: 32). The Litvaks, described as “smart, analytical, learned, worldly, proud, stubborn, dynamic and energetic” (Abramowicz 1999: 13) were ground down eventually to “camp people,” without the right to a home anywhere and consequently with rights almost nowhere (Wasserstein 2012: xx). The fortunate few, assisted by Jewish funds from abroad, emigrated to the United States, South Africa, Argentina, Palestine, Britain and Ireland. Those who remained were left to grapple with a constantly mutating panorama of Jewish experience wherein competing ideologies – modernity versus orthodoxy, assimilationist versus isolationist – took hold. New movements – Zionism, Bundism, Autonomism, Yiddishism – proliferated as a counterpoint to conservative or religious Judaism, as individuals railed against what they perceived as traditional Jewry's reluctance to engage with the modern world and failure to protect its people from the calamitous events that continued to befall them. Lithuania, which had emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a religious, cultural and political haven for Jews, gave rise to its own distinctive brand of each of these movements and they, collectively, constitute the

backdrop against which the lives of the narrators whom I interviewed were formed. To gain a fuller understanding of the landscape in which these movements flourished, however, it is important to first address the evolution of Lithuania's stature as a peerless centre of Torah learning on the world stage.

Berl Glazer - “Do you know, there were four Rabbis in my mother’s family?”



Figure 8. Berl Glazer at Choral Synagogue.

I have to believe. God is here, you have to know. There is only one God. In my mother’s family there were four famous Rabbis, and I had their remains brought here to the cemetery in Vilnius, to Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

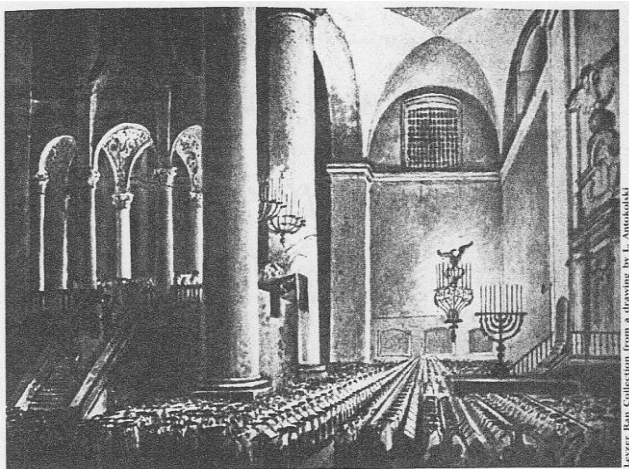
From the sixteenth century onwards, Lithuania came to be known as the “cradle of the yeshivas,” eventually earning an international reputation as a “Second Eretz Yisroel,” with Vilna claiming the sobriquet “Jerusalem of Lithuania” or Jerusalem of the North (Oshry 1995: vi). It was within a milieu of wooden synagogues and cramped study houses, of

Talmudic scholarship and incessant prayer that Berl's ancestors practised their faith, a faith that would, centuries later, call upon their remaining progeny to uproot and transport their remains to a “more fitting resting place.” This long established tradition of rabbinic scholarship is evidenced in *pinkes* (memorial book) entries for multiple *shtetls* dating as far back as the 1600s. From Lublin, 1639:

And the yeshiva students must teach the elementary school pupils for free
 ...and the financial warden shall not pay out the scholarship until such time as
 they have agreed to teach the elementary students...

From Khomsk, 1679:

Those who study Torah, for whom the Torah is their life, shall not veer from the tent
 of study... (Katz 2010a: 80-83).



Source: Katz, 2010
 Figure 9. Great Synagogue of Vilna.



Source: Kariv, 1967
 Figure 10. Chair of Elijah in the Jubarkas Synagogue.

Katz credits the city's emergence as a hub of Torah scholarship to the long established tradition, among wealthier Lithuanian communities, of luring top scholars from Germany and Poland to settle and teach in Lithuania. That anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians, while present, was less palpable in Lithuania than in Poland also

served to create an atmosphere in which Lithuanian Jews were relatively unhindered in their pursuit of Torah (2010a: 63).



Source: Katz, 2010

Figure 11. Vilna Gaon.

It was however, the famed Vilna Gaon who launched the capital's reputation as a spiritual centre, and to whom Berl continues to pay daily homage centuries later. Born in 1720, *Elyihu ben Shloymne* was acknowledged among his contemporaries as the “sharpest rabbinic mind for over a thousand years” (Katz 2010a: 85). As a young man he displayed a phenomenal memory for large tracts of Talmud which he could spout, at a moment’s notice, to substantiate his argument. Unlike his peers, he also possessed an extraordinary knowledge of science, mathematics, astronomy and astrology and was widely read in multiple languages. Travelling incognito across Eastern Europe, resolving disputes and Talmudic conundrums presented to him by Rabbis twice his age, the Gaon's fame spread swiftly. Yet, he refused to accept an official Rabbinic post, preferring instead to 'learn' with a small group of disciples, among them Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin whose Volozhin Yeshiva cemented for Vilna an international reputation as the seat of Torah scholarship, a reputation consolidated by the foundation in 1799 of the Romm Press, the

pre-eminent publisher of Rabbinic literature, and the establishment, in 1892, of the famed Strashun library (Abramowicz 1999: 13).



Figure 12. Vilna Gaon portrait at Berl Glazer's home.

The fervour with which the Gaon was followed was reflected in the tendency, among his disciples, of displaying his portrait in full view in their homes. The painting of the Gaon that occupies pride of place on Berl's living room wall attests, even today, to this practice. But the zeal that propelled Berl and countless others to adorn their domestic spaces with a visual replica of their spiritual master speaks not only of a decision to assiduously follow one leader but equally of a determination to reject others. For if the Gaon managed, during his lifetime, to draw an allegiance of unparalleled proportions from his followers, his reign over their religious destiny was a fractious one. In his recent text, *On the Eve*, historian Bernard Wasserstein contends that long before the Nazi genocide, Jewish culture across Europe was in retreat, beset not only by threat from outside, but also by dissent from within (2012: xxvii). The Jewish historian Jacob Katz has pointed to the period between 1770 and 1870 as one of major upheaval as Jews

underwent a transformation that changed their legal status, occupational distribution, cultural habits, as well as their religious outlook and behavior, and moved “from their former distinct pattern toward the standard common in their non Jewish surroundings, with some sectors of the community entirely absorbed by the environing society” (1998: 1- 2). Although these defections did not result, as some predicted at the time, in the total decomposition of the Jewish community, during this period the tenets of traditional Torah life were subjected to a battering from both East and West by the dual movements of *Hasidism*, which originated in the Ukraine, and *Haskalah* which began in Berlin (Dawidowicz 1967: 14).

Although considered the ultimate religious authority, the Gaon found himself at the heart of a highly contentious divide which endures in the region to this day: the *Hasidic-Mitnageddic* schism. Founded by Israel Bal Shem Tov (1700) in Podolia, *Hasidism* spawned a spiritual reformation, emphasizing the emotional and mystical content of Judaism (Greenbaum 1995: 85). Through a focus on prayer, piety, storytelling, song, dance and the practice of serving God 'joyously,' it sought to create direct communion between God and man, to elevate the status of women and the uneducated (in Talmud), and to stress the inherent spiritual capacity of every single person, irrespective of levels of Torah knowledge (Katz 2010a: 124). With its egalitarian doctrine of spiritual liberation, it engaged both rich and poor, sceptic and believer, as a result of which the notion that scholarship was the domain of the elite began to erode.

The movement spread swiftly across Ukraine, Poland, and Galicia, eventually making its way to Lithuania, where it was “not met kindly” (Greenbaum 1995: 85). The epithet *Mitnaggedim* (opponents) was coined by the *Hasids* to describe those who rejected the new trend, and was a title borne proudly by Jewish Lithuanian scholars who rallied behind the Gaon in his effort to quell the rising *Hasidic* tide. In 1781, the Gaon

called for the *herem* (excommunication) of its followers, launching a bitter internecine struggle that smouldered for decades, during which members of the two factions refused to pray together, refrained from eating in each other's homes, burned each other's books, prohibited inter-marriage between their offspring and even informed on each other to government officials (Greenbaum 1995: 86). Despite the flourishing of Hasidism across Eastern Europe however, and the formation of its uniquely Lithuanian '*Chabad*' movement, subsequent generations of Lithuanian Jews, whether laymen or rabbinical scholars, have clung to the image of the Gaon as a symbol of Jewish Vilna. Berl is among those who have carried such reverence into the twenty-first century. Three years after the Gaon's death, a small study hall was constructed in his former home, and there a group of *prushim* (men who turn away from the world) studied day and night around a long table, one taking over from the other so that there was never an empty seat, right up until the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1941 (Katz 2010a: 117).

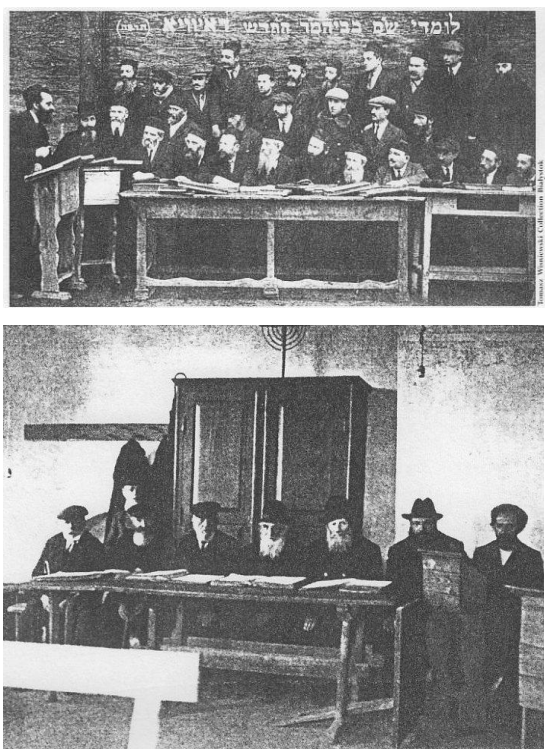


Figure 13. Gaon disciples. Source: Katz, 2010.

Fania Brantsovski – “When the man came each Friday to deliver our newspapers and he was asked who was at the door, he would answer, 'The bearer of culture.'”



Figure 14. Fania at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

I should like you to know about the surroundings we lived in. There were two Jewish theatres, many choirs and newspapers in Yiddish. But we also studied five languages at school and became acquainted with world literature, the sciences and all the classical writers. And every Friday when the man came to deliver our newspapers, and he was asked who was at the door, he would answer: I am the bearer of culture.

How then did Vilna, a city, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of Torah scribes, rabbinic scholars, ritual slaughterers, devout followers of the Gaon and Messianic Hasids transform in the twentieth century into one populated instead by students of world literature, modern educators, community activists and Yiddish writers? Where had these bearers of culture sprung from? It was the act of *prushim* (turning away from the world) that the *Maskils* (enlightened ones), the proponents of *Haskalah* or Jewish Enlightenment, most ardently railed against. Founded by Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the “hunch-

backed, Berlin Socrates,” *Haskalah*’s objective was to liberate Jews from the bondage of their oppressive Jewish past on the path to political and personal emancipation (Dawidowicz 1967: 15). Such liberation involved a practical disowning of the Eastern European Jew, whose very attire, hairstyle, mannerisms and speech were deemed to provoke unwanted negative attention. The *Maskil* or enlightener, by contrast, assumed a mode of “elegant speech, modern clothing, good manners, wit, erudition, to dazzle non-Jewish society” (Dawidowicz 1967: 16). The movement quickly extended eastwards through Galicia into Russia and eventually reached Lithuania where it found fertile ground across the Pale of Settlement, with Vilna soon becoming its citadel. That attitudes to the new movement, even among the observant, proved largely favourable, was due to the fact that the Vilna Gaon himself had always embraced the study of external wisdom (Levin 2000: 95).

The *Haskalah* favoured the overtly Russification policies of the Tsarist regime, believing that problems in the Pale would only be alleviated by ensuring secularized education for its Jewish masses. Describing her father, the prominent Jewish educator, cultural activist and writer Hirsz Abramowicz' experiences of the time, Dina Abramowicz writes:

At the age of fourteen, Father was sent to the city of Vilna to receive a secular education... the city was an important Jewish intellectual centre, a seat of traditional learning and the site of such great cultural institutions as the Strashun library and the Romm family publishing house. It was also the centre of the Lithuanian *Haskalah* ... the followers of *Haskalah* believed that modern secular education would lead to an improvement of the Jews' economic condition and legal status. The *maskilim* supported the efforts of the Russian government to develop a school network for Jewish children. The curriculum and the spirit of the schools reflected the Russian government's goal of Russifying Jewish children by teaching them the Russian language and nurturing their feelings of patriotism (1999: 21).

As the Lithuanian *Haskalah* evolved, it gave rise to a polyglot group, educated in secular studies who, lured by the prospect of finding employment in government institutions and wider society, discarded their traditional garb, donned European fashions, shaved their beards, cut their ear-locks, abandoned religious observance and avidly pursued Russian culture (Greenbaum: 126). Fania's forebears, whom she describes as mainly non-religious and could be loosely considered part of such a group, counted among their number: painters, craftsmen, artisans, bakers, singers, jewellers, teachers and engineers, forward-thinking Jews who engaged in the wider world and embodied the tenets of the *Haskalah*. They were also, given their professions, likely candidates for membership of the Bund. Numbering over 650,000 in the late 1800s, Jewish artisans and craftsmen, day labourers and factory workers vastly outnumbered employment opportunities in the congested Pale. Alarmed by workers' conditions, revolutionary tensions in the Empire and the rise of government supported anti-Semitism, a group of Vilna-based Jewish intellectuals came to believe that only with the formation of an official labour movement, attendant to their particular needs, could Jews emerge from the all-pervasive poverty which engulfed them (Dawidowicz 1967: 58). In 1896, a strike was organized in the Vindelsberg brush factory. Therafter the *Bershter Bund*, or Brush Workers Union, the first professional organization for Jewish workers, was established. Following their lead, others quickly formed and in 1897, the *Bund*, or General Jewish Worker's Union, was founded in Vilna by Arkady Kremer, the son of a poor Lithuanian *Maskil*. The first *Bund* conference was held secretly in Vilna on October, attended by 13 delegates who represented over 34,000 members (Levin 2000: 104).



Figure 15. Members of the Bund (Jewish Labor Bund) in Vilnius (Vilna) at a festive event in 1917 marking the movement's twentieth anniversary.

Source: Ghetto Fighters Archive

The organization used Yiddish as their vehicle of communication and was successful in attracting not only workers and members of the intelligentsia but many alienated and assimilated Jews who had lost contact with their roots. Their goal, at the outset, was not the creation of a “special Jewish mass movement but the development of cadres for the Russian revolutionary movement” (Sutton 2008: 34). Gradually, however, the *Bund* came to acknowledge its specifically Jewish character, carving out for its membership a vibrant cultural life, with its own secular Yiddish school system, periodicals, seminars, evening classes for adults and drama societies. As explained by Vladimir Medem in his essay, *The Youth of a Bundist*:

In the winter of 1899-1900 I became a member of the Bund. At that time, I don't believe I understood the concept of the Bund as a Jewish organization, and its proper role in Jewish life. But, looking back, I realise that Bundist thought on this subject had not yet been clarified... I remember a conversation concerning the uniqueness of the Jewish labour movement some time later, in 1901. We were in prison (with Yasha), together in one cell, and behind bars we held a discussion about the quality

of our movement. I tried to summarize. Our movement, I said, has two major characteristics. Most of our people are employed in small or very tiny workshops, belonging to artisans who themselves work. The second characteristic of our movement is that it consists of Jews, the children of the Jewish people. There are two forces impelling the Jewish worker in our movement: his class feeling, the consciousness that he is a worker who is being exploited, and that he wants to fight together with his brothers for a better life; and his Jewish feeling, the consciousness that he is a Jew (Davidowicz 1967: 433).

The challenges of calibrating such competing agendas intensified with the Kishenev pogrom on Easter Sunday 1903, during which Jews were massacred and wounded, their homes, businesses and shops looted and destroyed. The revolution, two years later, sparked a new, intensive wave of pogroms. In the wake of these events, Jews of all stripes, among them Fania's grand-parents and parents, were catalyzed toward a previously elusive sense of national self-awareness. A major difference between these events and the previous 1881 debacle was the presence, in the latter, of '*zelbshuts*,' Jewish self-defense groups, organized by the *Bund* to ward off attacks by the Black Hundreds, counter-revolutionary forces made up of Russian peasants and workers (Dawidiowicz 1967: 62). Where previously the Rabbis, the well-connected court Jews, the writers and intellectuals, the wealthy and the well-born had set the tone and pace of Jewish communal life, here ordinary folk – proletarian, plebeian, common —became the agents of change, capable of determining, or at least influencing their own futures. And what did they elect to do? They emigrated to the Americas, Europe or South Africa, they raised money for Palestine, they organized and joined labour movements. And they took up arms to defend themselves (Dawidowicz 1967: 62). As one Bundist explained:

The old heroic spirit was reborn among the Jews. It has come to life in the heart of the Jewish proletariat. For centuries, the Jew has lived like a slave. He considered suffering and silence his highest virtues. When his blood was shed he

fell like a dumb animal under the hand of the slaughterer, without struggle, without resistance...the soul of the ancient Jewish heroes wandering the world of chaos has finally found its place. The Jewish worker heroes acquired it (Dawidowicz 1967: 62-90).

Although exploiting a Maccabean tradition the *zelbshuts* were essentially a revolt against Jewish traditionalist acceptance of suffering as disorder in the world that would only be set right with the coming of the Messiah. And it was that 'soul of the ancient Jewish heroes,' the courage of Biblical figures like the Maccabees that ultimately shaped the consciousness of a generation of young Vilna Jews and steered them towards resistance, armed if necessary: among them, Fania and her contemporary and eventual lifelong friend, Chasia Spanerflig.

Chasia Spanerflig – “We were taught that we have to be as strong...”



Figure 16. Chasia at home.

We were educated to be great patriots of our home country, Israel. We studied the Hebrew language, and about Biblical figures and the life of great people there- and I think this helped us to survive. We learnt what the Jews went through, all the different personalities and heroes from the Bible, and we were taught that we have to be as strong as they were to be able to overcome.

Chasia, Fania and their peers were taught in the *Haskalik* tradition, to be “people of the world and good people.” Chasia, however, was equally influenced by the Zionist affiliations of her father, a Vilna intellectual, whom she describes as “leftist, non-religious, a fluent Hebrew speaker and ardent supporter of the State of Israel.” Although as the only child of elderly parents, he himself had no desire to emigrate to Palestine, his regard for “important and great Jews, how they lived in the world” would trickle down to his daughter, prompting in her a yearning to reclaim her 'homeland.'

Notions about the end of exile and a return to Zion draw upon the most durable, potent Jewish traditions dating back to the destruction of the second temple and the subsequent expulsion of Jews from their native land. In Lithuania, this manifested, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the transfer of funds to Jewish communities in Palestine, and later in the actual emigration of Lithuanian Jews (Levin 2000: 101). It was, however, in the aftermath of the 1881 pogroms that the political thrust of Zionism emerged with the publication of Leon Pinsker's landmark text on Zionist ideology *Auto-Emancipation* in 1882. An Odessa physician for whom the 1881 pogroms had highlighted the ineffectiveness of the *Haskalah* to secure Jewish interests, Pinsker stressed:

Since the Jew is nowhere at home, nowhere regarded as a native, he remains an alien everywhere. That he himself and his forefathers as well are born in the country does not alter this fact in the least. In the greatest majority of cases he is treated as a stepchild, a Cinderella...never is he considered a legitimate child of the fatherland. (1937: 21).

The belief, among Jews, in the intervention of a higher power to bring about political resurrection and the stubborn notion that they must, in the meantime, bear patiently the punishment inflicted by God, had caused them, he suggested, to discard the

quest for a national identity. As a people without a fatherland, he asserted, they had forgotten their fatherland (27). His mission was to secure if not a 'homeland,' at the very least, 'a home' for Jews, although he did not exclusively identify this as Israel. “We need nothing,” he insisted:

..but a large piece of land for our poor brothers, a piece of land which shall remain our property, from which no foreign master can expel us. Thither we shall take with us the most sacred possessions which have saved from the shipwreck of our former fatherland, the God-idea and the Bible. Perhaps the Holy Land will again become ours. If so, all the better” (32).



Figure 17. Zionist activists in Lithuania, 1911.

Source: Levin, 2000.

Pinsker's call was heeded some years later by popular Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl whose book, *Der Judenstaat* (the Jewish State), published in 1896, echoed the argument for a Jewish home. At Herzl's urging the first annual Zionist Congress was convened in Basel in 1897 with five Lithuanian delegates in attendance. After the congress, Herzl declared, “In Basel I have created a Jewish State” (Eliach 1998:

487). Having 'created' it, he was the most likely candidate to lead it. That state boasted its own official press and bank, The Jewish Colonial Trust, which oversaw the purchase of land in Palestine, via membership fees, called *sheklech*, drawing on the biblical term. Zionism spread rapidly, finding within the Lithuanian *shtetls* a willing audience for its message. In 1898, in Eishyshok, a large crowd gathered in a newly built tavern. The walls were covered with photos of Herzl; a table in the corner displayed books, newspapers and pamphlets describing the new movement. A fashionably attired eighteen-year-old boy, Yitzhak Willanski, addressed the gathering: "A person has arisen by the name of Dr. Herzl who will bring redemption to his people. He will bring his people back to their homeland...how long will we suffer in silence. Let us free ourselves. Let each Jew purchase a *shekel* and a share of the Jewish Colonial Bank" (Eliach 1998:489).

Small Zionist associations mushroomed throughout the country, their platform of return and settlement drawing support from *hasids*, *mitnaggedim* and secular Jews, men and women, young and old alike (Greenbaum 1995: 133). When, in 1904, Herzl made a whistle-stop visit to Vilna, to witness firsthand the Jewish masses he had heard so much about, he was delighted by the "tumultuous Jewish streets" that greeted him (Dawidowicz 1967: 61). The following day he wrote in his diary: "Yesterday, Vilna day was something I shall never forget" (Greenbaum 1995: 140).

Nonetheless Zionism met with opposition from within Jewish quarters, with conflicts surfacing between the youth, who viewed Herzl's Zionism as a great equalizer, and community elders who began, despite initial support, to fear the movement as a threat to the way of *shtetl* life which had prevailed for centuries. Ideological differences surfaced even within the Zionist camp between supporters of Herzl's political Zionism and those who favoured instead a cultural or spiritual Zionism, among them Asher Zvi Ginzberg or *Ahad Ha'am* (One of the People) as he was known. A Hebrew writer and

educator, *Ahad Ha'am* conceived of a national cultural revival, with the Jewish State in Palestine forming an exemplary model for Diasporic Jewry to emulate (Davidowicz 1967: 367). Add to this ideological cauldron, the concept of Autonomism, articulated by the revered Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, as a 'spiritual Zionism,' in which the survival of the Jewish nation was deemed dependent upon the development of spiritual nationhood through which communities might engage in autonomous self-rule while, at once, forming part of and responding to larger society. Dubnow believed unequivocally in the presence of a mystic force, a specifically Jewish will to live. Even bereft of country and dispersed, the Jewish nation, he insisted, “contains a living soul which refuses to separate from its integument and cannot be forced out of it by heavy trials and misfortunes such as would unfailingly inflict mortal injury upon less sturdy organisms” (1903: 178). Travelling across Eastern Europe in 1926, the writer Joseph Roth witnessed that 'living soul' firsthand. “The idea of Jewish nationalism,” he later wrote, “is very much alive in the East. Even people who themselves have little truck with the language, culture and religion of their forefathers claim membership of the Jewish nation on the basis of their will and their race” (2001: 9). Dubnow's 'Diaspora nationalism' was eventually represented formally by the *Yiddishe Folkspartey* (Jewish People's Party), formed in 1906, which shared Zionism's conception of Jewish people-hood but rejected the idea of a Jewish state as Utopian and, most likely, unrealistic. Dubnow was murdered in Riga in 1941.

Herzl died unexpectedly of heart failure in 1904 and was eventually replaced by scientist Chaim Weizmann, who through negotiation with the British would eventually convert his vision of a Jewish state into reality, becoming the first president of the State of Israel in February 1949. But it was another visionary, a proponent of decidedly different tactics and a rival of Weizmann's, who lured young students like Chasia to the

fold. Exorcised by the pogroms of 1903, Vladimir Jabotinsky, a young journalist and lawyer from Odessa formed the Jewish Self-Defence Organization urging Jews to engage in militant defence against Russian attacks. Convinced, however, that the Jewish future in Europe was essentially doomed, he enthusiastically joined the Zionist movement. Due to ideological differences with Weizmann, he left in 1923 to found the Zionist Revisionist movement and its youth component *Betar*. Hailed as an original thinker and powerful orator, he was unequivocal in his belief in the use of arms to secure the Jewish state.



Figure 18. Betar youth undergo training, 1933.
Source: Levin, 2000.

The ideological conflicts between Weizmann's negotiationist and Jabotinsky's militant stances were not lost on Chasia. Speaking of her commitment to the latter, she explains:

He had a calling, which means, from living water, a living stream, a living source. This is how I understand it (holding out her two hands). *Tel Hai*, which means two hands in Hebrew, and they represent 'homeland,' one hand for defence and the other for labour. Two hands build a country. One is the hand of

power, the other of industry. And this was Jabotinsky's plan. And I understood it, I really understood it. Because Israel at the time was a British colony and Weizmann's view was that we had to redeem it, to buy back the land again. But I have to say that I didn't support this idea. I liked the other one (Jabotinsky's) much better. And when Jabotinsky spoke at the Philharmonic here in Vilna, I went to see him...

It was thus in 1939, when crowds gathered in central Vilnius to hear the legendary Jabotinsky speak, a teenaged Chasia would find herself standing against the back wall beside a handsome young man, Boris Fridman, soon to become the famed partisan fighter and her husband.

Whatever the gravitational pull that commanded their attentions, whether religious, social, cultural or political, Rachel, Berl, Dobke, Fania and Chasia considered themselves first and foremost as Jews. But there were others for whom identity was a more hyphenated affair. Josef Levinson, born in the *shtetl* of Veisiejai, was one such individual, describing himself as Communist first and Jew second. Under what conditions were such keen Communist leanings engendered?

Josef Levinson – “In Lithuania, there were poets, famous speakers and thinkers, and they supported the ideals of hope and a brighter future for the people.”



Figure 19. Josef at home.

What can I tell you? Imagine work day is ten, eleven hours, you work a lot and very hard, you only earn enough to eat every second day. That was the towns, but in the villages where the people owned no land, they slaved for others; life was very hard. And in Lithuania there were poets, famous speakers and thinkers and they supported these ideals of hope and a brighter future for the people.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914 over half a million Jews volunteered to serve in the Tsar's armed forces; synagogues throughout the Empire held celebratory services in support of the Empire with Jews vowing publicly to fight side by side with the Russians until victory was achieved. By the time Josef was born in 1917, however, Russia had imposed military rule along Lithuanian border towns, Jewish presses had closed down, a new wave of pogroms had broken out, rumours of Jews collaborating with the Germans abounded and the mass expulsion of Jews was well underway. While on a folkloric expedition through Ukraine, An-sky heard “wild and fantastic stories” about Jews who'd

set trees alight to reveal Russian army positions, or even disembowelled a Jew's carcass, stuffed it with eight million rubbles' worth of gold and carried it across to the enemy (2002: 4).

As Josef recalls: "The Russians couldn't explain to their people why they were losing the war so when they wanted a solution, they decided to blame the Jews. They claimed that Jews were spying for the Germans so they issued an order to expel the Jewish population deep into the Russian territories..." The brutality of these expulsions was unprecedented with Jews, regardless of age or capacity – hospital patients, the institutionalized and handicapped, the mentally ill and the young – despatched without warning from their homes (Levin 2000: 108). Josef's family, alongside thousands of others, crossed the border to Southern Ukraine, only returning to Veisiejai in 1922 when it was finally deemed safe to do so.



Figure 20. Jewish deportees waiting for a train.
Source: Levin, 2000.

In the intervening years, under German occupation (1915-1918), Jews held out hope that their lot might improve. Initial signs proved promising. Proclamations and public announcements were issued in Yiddish as well as Lithuanian, the re-opening of several *Yeshivot* was authorized, the sale of special flour for Passover was sanctioned and the publication of a Jewish newspaper, *Lezte Nayer* was permitted long before a Lithuanian one (Levin 2000: 110). Economic conditions, however, soon deteriorated. Lithuanians and Jews alike were deported as labourers to the mines in the Ruhr region. Random confiscations of food products for the occupying army dented stocks among agricultural and retail workers. Conditions at the labour camps were abysmal, outbreaks of typhoid and cholera multiplied with many dying of illness and starvation. Jews, however, did hold the advantage of speaking Yiddish (similar to German) and many secured work in the military as translators, intermediaries and advisors. That Jews were treated on par with other ethnic groups rather than as inferiors, as had been the norm under the Russians, perhaps accounted for why, when faced with the Nazi threat decades later, many Jews refused to countenance the horrors that awaited them, pointing to their parents' experiences under a German administration as justification for optimism.

As Germany's position weakened, Lithuanians were granted permission to convene a National Council from which the Taryba, or representative body, for the Lithuanian people, was formed. The Taryba declared Lithuanian independence on February 16th, 1918 and the first government, sanctioned by Kaiser Wilhelm II, instated on November 5th, 1918 under the leadership of A. Voldemaras. In newly independent Lithuania, Jewish autonomy enjoyed an auspicious start. The government pledged to respect minority rights, in particular those of Jews, stating: "We want to give Jews not only political but also national rights. We understand the need for Jewish national autonomy. We want all minorities to live in peace and harmony in Lithuania"

(Greenbaum 1995: 235). A special Ministry for Jewish Affairs was established and in its first optimistic report, announced:

We are now experiencing, perhaps for the first time in our long history, an era when we are not, as we used to be, merely silent witnesses to the restoration of other nations, but we are participants in our own renaissance which will give our life a new quality, liberate it, enrich it, beautify it (Dawidowicz 1967: 76).

The newfound stability was short-lived. On April 20th, 1919, Polish forces captured Vilnius, and Kaunas was designated as the provisional capital. This severing of relations between Poland and Lithuania had serious consequences for Jewish families, many of whom found themselves, with Vilna closed off, unable to visit or communicate with each other. Despite the difficulties imposed by such geographical curtailments, Jews rejoiced in August of that year when, eager to cement its viability as a democratic nation at the Paris Peace Conference, the Lithuanian government publicly declared its commitment to ensuring equal rights for Jews. A letter sent by the Lithuanian delegation to the international Committee of Jewish representatives outlined its intention that “Jews are to enjoy autonomy in matters of religion, charity, social welfare, education, culture, and that Jewish national autonomous bodies are to be considered as “state institutions” (Levin 2000:118). In response, Jewish communities across the nation held elections, selecting a total of 1,280 individuals, representing three main Jewish groups: *Zei'rei Zion* (Young Zionists), *Agudat Israel* (ultra-orthodox Zionists,) and Workers (Communists). Six out of 112 representatives in Lithuania's founding parliament were Jewish. At the first National Conference of Jewish Communities, Prime Minister Voldemaras introduced himself as “a friend of the Jews.” At the second conference, Prime Minister Galvanauskas again noted that only Lithuania, among the countries of Europe, had offered the Jews full

freedom to develop their national culture. Further evidence of Lithuania's goodwill emerged in 1921 when the state formally allowed Jewish deputies in parliament to address the audience in Yiddish and with the permission, shortly thereafter, for street signs in the capital Kaunas to be printed in Hebrew (Greenbaum 1995: 344; Levin 2000: 121). These acts, though largely symbolic, “did their part to convince many that Lithuania (unlike neighbouring Poland) was truly a 'paradise' for the Jewish population” (Mendelsohn 1983: 222).

For all these demonstrations of goodwill, tensions soon flared between Jews and Lithuanians who viewed the unprecedented levels of autonomy achieved by Jews with growing suspicion. It was on account of Jews' unreasonable demands, other groups asserted, that the Minorities Proclamation, designed to ensure equal rights for all minority groups, eventually floundered. In 1924, the Ministry for Jewish Affairs, embarked upon with such promise a few years earlier, was abolished and soon thereafter the Jewish National Council suffered a similar fate (Mendelsohn 1983: 223). The government introduced a series of restrictive measures including the closure of businesses on Sundays and the requirement that all records, public signboards and advertisements had to be kept in the Lithuanian language. The right-wing presses, *Rytas* (Morning) and *Tautos-Valia* (People's Voice) openly accused Jews of bringing Bolshevism to Lithuania for which, it asserted, God would punish them. In December 1926, the Seimas was dissolved by a nationalist-fascist coup which elected Antanas Smetona as president, bringing about a swift end to democracy in Lithuania (Greenbaum 1995:261).

It was against this fraught backdrop of fluctuating fortunes, successive occupations and the flow of refugees in and out that Josef dedicated himself, from early childhood, to securing an education. His school years coincided with the adoption, by the Lithuanian government, of stringent measures to inhibit the Jewish sphere of influence.

Jews were removed from police and army, from government and municipal offices and blacklisted from the tobacco, matches and sugar industries in which they had previously enjoyed monopolies. The historically Jewish trades of flax, wood and transport were transferred to a government concern. Across the board, in crafts and industry, in government agencies and the professions the role of Jews declined. This circumstance was highlighted even further when the organization *Verslininkai*, comprised of Lithuanian merchants and craftsmen, launched an anti-Semitic propaganda campaign via its weekly journal, *Verslas*, in which it called for the transfer of jobs and businesses formerly held by Jews to Lithuanians and for the deportation of all Jews who had entered the country post-1918. Their slogan 'Lithuania for Lithuanians' was widely heeded, resulting in the gradual erosion of Jewish participation in the social, cultural and political life of the country (Levin 1995: 141). In education too, the lockdown was acutely felt. A law was issued requiring all entrance exams to be taken in Lithuanian which proved problematic for many Jews whose first languages were Yiddish and Russian, Josef among them. "I wanted to study mathematics and physics but first I had to pass Lithuanian language and literature," he explains, "but I failed because this was not my language, but I understood I had to study even more, and so I entered Kaunas University, Faculty of Nature and Physics, not as full student but as one who can attend and listen, until I could pass the Lithuanian exam." That Josef managed, aged seventeen, to overcome these obstacles is a testament to his own determination and to the influence of a teacher who championed his advancement. Others were not so fortunate. Although it had been estimated that in 1920s' Vilna, three-quarters of the city's doctors were Jewish, by 1935, there was not a single Jew in the first year of medical school anywhere in the country (RG116/13/2.5: 6-8 YIVO). Eventually Jews were expelled from universities altogether.

It was, no doubt, the impact of the government's right-wing Lithuaniaization policies and the Jewish community's failure to grasp political purchase through standard, mainstream measures that first propelled Josef towards Communism. His was a home in which the dashed hopes of Jewish agency were acutely felt; part of his grandfather's brewery had been appropriated by Lithuanian officials, his family uprooted by expulsion, his own academic aspirations thwarted. But it was not so much the failure of national Jewish autonomy as it was the inexorable economic decline of the community that most affected him. Jews, he was aware, were not alone in this regard. In Lithuania, as in Poland, and parts of Romania and Czechoslovakia, the decline of the Jewish trader and artisan was matched by that of the non-Jewish peasant and worker. Their lot, Josef describes as “absolutely dire.”

When he arrived at university, he was greeted by “the very active political life of the students” and sympathised, in particular, with a group of young Communists who followed “the poets, the intellectuals, the radicals who had very strong moral support in society, because social injustice of the society was really high, with many unemployed people and life conditions of workers really, really desperate.” Their ideals and “hopes for a better future” would seep into his educational aspirations – his senior thesis revolved around a model for workshops and factories to burn leftover wood and convert it to heating for the poor – into his decision to join the Russian army, his subsequent work on collective farms and his lifelong service as an engineer under the Soviet regime. Although the number of young Lithuanian Jews who joined the party was proportionally small, as most opted instead for membership in Zionist or Bundist groups, it was nonetheless impressive in terms of prominence and influence, especially within the party's upper echelons (Mendelsohn 1983: 232), a fact that would become an important source of and justification for Lithuanian anti-Semitism.

Combined, these narrators represent a multiplicity of pre-war Jewish Lithuanian experiences. From Rachel's long-standing roots in the country to Dora's evocation of *shtetl* life, Berl's religious beliefs, Fania's *Haskalik* and *Bundist* associations, Chasia's Zionist and Josef's Communist affiliations, a vibrant portrait of Jewish social, cultural and political life emerges. It is true that the long-held promise of Jewish autonomy, first whispered during the reign of Gediminas in 1323, advanced under Vytautas and partially consolidated during Lithuanian Independence centuries later, was buffeted from all sides in the lead-up to the Nazi invasion. But it is also true that if independent Lithuania turned out to be, in the end, “not a very good country for Jews as individuals,” it remained a good country so far as 'Judaism' was concerned. In Lithuania, autonomous Jewish culture remained “until the very end, stronger and more vigorous than in any other country in Europe” (Mendelsohn 1983: 238). Despite its vacillating fortunes, the dispossessions and deportations, the expulsions and forced labour, the restrictions on movement, profession, and language, despite the stranglehold imposed by Lithuanianization, the individuals with whom I met retained something of the rich, colourful and vital world they had once found 'refuge' in. Their stories and memories speak to the ongoing, mythic presence of Vilna as a citadel for Torah learning, Yiddish literature and culture, intellectual prowess, workers' unions and socialist and Zionist activity. For Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, the spirit of Vilna was characterized by the all-embracing, unlimited allegiance Jews displayed to their native city, regardless of ideological, religious or economic differences (Cohen et al 2010: 223). How then had this world remained, however precariously, aloft?

A comprehensive report on the Jews of Lithuania in the early 1930s (RG116/13/2.6: 2-3 YIVO) suggests that while unorthodoxy multiplied in the inter-war

years, with increasing numbers of Jewish stores opening on the Sabbath, the influence of religious tradition, even on those who considered themselves secularists or leftist, remained strong, resulting in less assimilation among Jews in Lithuania than other countries. The number of Yiddish-speakers at the time amounted to close to 97 per cent of the entire Jewish population. This was, in large part, due to the success of the nationwide *Tarbut* (Hebrew for Culture) Academies which both Fania and Chasia attended in Vilna, where a wide range of subjects was taught through Yiddish. Night classes from the Jewish Popular University in needle-work, child-care, electrical engineering, auto-mechanics and, from ORT (Organization of the Rehabilitation of Jews through Training), in technical drawing, hairdressing, millinery and refurbishment were all delivered in Yiddish. That Vilna became, in the words of Hirsz Abramowicz, “the city of the most intimate Jewishness in the world” and the “most Yiddishist city in the world” (1999: 31) was also attributable to the opening of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute) there in 1925, under the direction of Max Weinrich (Katz 2010a: 286). YIVO’s first major conference in 1929 consolidated Vilna’s position as the symbolic international address for Yiddish scholarship. Ambitious to construct an intellectual engine for the collective self-understanding of East European Jewry, it set up departments in philology, history, economics, statistics, psychology and pedagogy all of which were also delivered in Yiddish (Wasserstein 2012: 109). YIVO’s ethnographic commission, comprised of a network of several hundred volunteer *zamlers* (collectors), gathered materials on *Ashkenazi* folklore and its major library and archive were unparalleled. While determinedly secularist, YIVO’s leaders “sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously ... borrowed their belief in the redemptive role of culture from the traditional emphasis on the study of Torah and the performance of *mitzvot* (good deeds) (Wasserstein 2012: 110).

Despite being cut off from the major artery of Jewish cultural life in Vilna, the Jews of independent Lithuania managed to maintain several Yiddish newspapers which responded to the needs of the Zionist federations, the Folkists, socialists, ultra-orthodox and the revisionists. In all, over 60 Yiddish and Hebrew magazines appeared in Lithuania between 1921 and 1931 (Levin 2000:154). Jewish theatre troupes and cultural organizations also flourished. Intellectuals and historians Simon Dubnow, Zelig Kalmanovitch, and Abba Ahimeir, and poets Chaim Bialik and Itzik Manger were all frequent visitors, disseminating their work to a wide and receptive audience. *Jung Vilne*, a group of writers, poets and artists, active in what is often deemed the final phase of Vilna literary creativity, were known to meet weekly at *Cafe Velekh* at the corner of Yidishe Gas in central Vilnius from 1929 onwards (Wasserstein 2012: 111). Among their most stalwart members, Avrom Sutzkever, Shmerke Kazerzinski and Hirsch Glik (who went on to write the *Song of the Partisans*), would later become the bedrock of spiritual resistance in the Vilna Ghetto.



Figure 21. Jung Vilne group. Source: Yad Vashem



Figure 22. Jabotinsky salutes Betar militants. Source: Levin, 2000.

Jewish political life was also a burgeoning affair with Zionist, Orthodox, Bundists/Folkists and Communist movements all claiming a stake of the constituency. It could be argued that rather than splintering Jewish solidarity, the diversity of opportunity for political engagement actually strengthened it (Dawidowicz 1967: 80), with each group claiming responsibility for a discrete aspect of Jewish life. Liberal Zionists were active in the fields of education and culture, Socialist Zionists in the *Tarbut* school system and youth pioneer movements, the religious camp in promoting *Torah* observance and the Folkists in vocational training opportunities and advancing the role of Yiddish as a unifying force.

In the inter-war years, Lithuania was also home to 120 Hebrew and Yiddish libraries. Vilnius alone boasted 109 synagogues with several hundred more dotted across the country. There were Jewish real estate organizations, health agencies, ritual slaughter and *kashruth* committees, fire-fighting and soldiers' associations, trade unions, male and female choirs, scout troops and a host of other social, economic and cultural committees catering to the needs of the Jewish population. Thus, despite a harsh and public campaign

to stifle Jewish life, the individuals with whom I met recall an active, dynamic and vibrant Jewish presence in pre-war Lithuania.



Figure 23. Jewish medical staff. Source: Levin, 2000

Did they know of the storm clouds gathering? Could they have anticipated what was to come? Some point to their parents' previous experiences under German occupation during the First World War as rationale for a sense of complacency, optimism, denial. As survivor, Gita Gleseleva recounts:

My brother evacuated to Russia with the retreating Red Army. Not only him, many young people decided to go to Russia, because they had heard what was happening in Poland. But my father said, 'I want to stay here. I was in captivity under the Germans for five years in 1914 and the Germans are humans just as we are.'

For those who remained, including all of Gita's family members, the outcome was calamitous. By the mid 1930s, German broadcasting services were inserting their anti-Semitic message into an already virulent Lithuania-wide campaign. Emboldened by external support, local newspapers became increasingly brazen with articles suggesting

that it was illegal for Jews to hire Christian women as maids, that Jews should be excluded from all holiday resorts and be forced to bathe in fenced-off beaches. A series of anti-Semitic manuscripts promoting a radical nationalistic agenda also emerged. In one such text, G. Papini, spoke of Jews as “craving material wealth... rather ugly... treating others as if they were dust, like a master his slaves, to request they blindly obey his despotic will” (Vareikis 2004: 158). In 1939, the Lithuanian Christian Workers Union called on its members to “launch the fight against those Jewish parasites who grew rich from our bloody work and who are exploiting us, and have no shame nor conscience.” The address ended with the words: “Brothers Lithuanian Workers, it is time we stopped toiling under the Jewish yoke” (161). As a result of such rhetoric, there was a marked increase in unprovoked anti-Semitic attacks. In Rachel's *shtetl* of Siauliai in 1934, shop windows along the main Jewish thoroughfare were smashed. In Kaunas, five synagogues were desecrated and leaflets distributed calling for a mass boycott on Jewish firms, in order “to throw off the influence of the aliens” (RG116/13/2.5-15: YIVO). Lucy Dawidowicz, the American author and historian who, in September 1938, had just arrived in Vilnius to study Yiddish at YIVO, vividly recalls in her memoir, *From That Place and Time*, the day she witnessed an anti-Jewish boycott first-hand. Shopping on the streets for some typing paper, she came upon two young men distributing leaflets outside a Jewish-owned store. Printed on them were the words: 'Don't Buy From Jews.' “I went towards the store's entrance,” she writes:

One of the men barred my way. I didn't know the rules of picketing, that they only stopped those who they thought were Gentiles, (not Jews) though they insulted them on the way in and the way out, and for good measure would also abuse Jews walking by on the street. They mistook me for a Gentile, perhaps because the cut of my clothes made me look different. ...This was my first encounter with real live, anti-Semites. Though I was raised in a household that

divided the world between Them and Us, I never knew any of them at firsthand.
No child in school or on the street, ever called me a Christ killer or a dirty Jew
(1989: 170).

As attacks on person and property intensified, a small group of influential left-wing Jewish leaders formed a secret council to negotiate with the government to protect Jewish interests. Despite calling on international organisations to intervene on their behalf, they were ill-equipped to stem the tide of rising anti-Semitism, as evidenced in the following series of communications. In one of Lucy Dawidowicz' first letters home in late 1938, she could barely contain her excitement at having attended a 'real Seder.' Less than a year later, on August 24, 1939, she received a warning letter from the American Embassy in Warsaw which stated:

In view of the recent developments in the international situation ...it is suggested that you give immediate serious consideration as to whether in case an emergency arise, you would remain or depart... as transportation and other facilities might be interrupted or made difficult, arrangements for a planned departure should not be delayed too long (RG675/75/2: YIVO) .

Of her departure that very day, she writes:

The thought of fleeing so precipitously, in such a cowardly manner, was intolerable to me.. I could not stand the idea of running away. Not could I then, at that moment, of danger, conceive of leaving the Kalmanoviches (her close friends). I made a passionate avowal that I would remain with them. I was young and strong. I could work. I could help them... but Rivele Kalmanovich responded harshly to me, 'What do you know of war? You can't begin to imagine what it will be like. You won't be of help to us, but a burden, another mouth to feed. Thank God you have time to go (1989: 190).

Lucy made her way to YIVO headquarters. She bade her farewells, assuring her colleagues and friends that they would meet again soon, repeating phrases of hope in which she herself had little confidence. Then she walked down the long hallway, out into the street, the last sight of YIVO's "gleaming vestibule" etched forever in her memory (1989: 192). As it turned out, Lucy Dawidowicz was indeed lucky that she had time to leave. Others did not.

In October 1938, a New York textiles merchant, Robert Bernstein, writes to a Mr. Daniel Robins in Warren, Ohio about a "very pathetic letter" he has just received from his step-sister, Mary Valencik in Lithuania, who is desperate to "get her daughter out." Mr. Robins kindly offers to take in the young girl if she can secure permission to travel. When this is not forthcoming, Bernstein again beseeches Robins:

I am appealing to you from a very humane point of view ...to see what you can do for them. My only regret is that I am not in a position to aid them as much as I really would like to on behalf of her and myself, I hope you will take care of this matter and I thank you very much for what you will do for them.

Robins replies that he has made several inquiries with the authorities but has not received a response and cautions patience. In June 1939, the Foreign Office of the United States writes to confirm that the application has been formally approved and that the child can receive a "nonpreference immigration visa" when a number under the Lithuanian quota becomes available. The letters go back and forth between concerned relatives, Jewish agencies, Department of State, the American Embassy and individuals who have pledged to assist. They come to an abrupt end in 1941 in the form of an unopened envelope, stamped with the Nazi crest and the words: 'Return to Sender' (RG116/12/1.9:YIVO)

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October 21st, 1938

Mr. Daniel Robins
c/o Robin Theatre
Warren, Ohio

My dear Mr. Robins:

I am taking the opportunity in writing you this letter as I have received a very pathetic letter from my step-sister Mary Valencik of Lithuania. You must no doubt know of the difficulties that they are living under always in constant fear of Hitler and a German invasion of their territory.

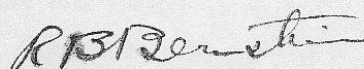
She writes me that you were good enough sometime ago to tell her that you would take her little daughter to live with you. As a result she went through a great deal of trouble and anguish in getting certain documents from the consul in readiness for her little daughter to come to America as per your kind offer to her. Now, she writes me that she has written you several letters but up to date she has not received a response.

I am appealing to you from a humane point of view as well as your relationship to them to see what you can do for them. My only regret is that I am not in a position to aid them as much as I really would like to. No doubt she has written to you that I used to do a great deal for her at the time I was in a position to.

Therefore, I hope to hear from you real soon whether you are going to write to her regarding this matter which is so important to her. On behalf of her and myself I hope you will take care of this matter and I thank you very much for what you will do for them.

With kindest regards and best wishes, I remain

Very truly yours



RBB:GA

ROBERT B. BERNSTEIN

TERRITORIAL COLLECTION BALTIC. RG 116-12-1.9.

Figure 25. Bernstein letter.

Source: YIVO

In the sense that Lithuanians had long regarded Jews as a block to their own progress (Greenbaum 1995: 276), the economic tensions that surfaced during and post-independence can be attributed to Jewish dominance in the merchant and artisan classes and in the fields of law, medicine, and the professions, which fomented envy among the Lithuanian peasant masses and its emergent elite (Sutton 2008: 46). Add to this the unprecedented levels of autonomy, however short-lived, that Jews achieved during this period, which further promoted rivalry between Jews and other groups. While these factors were alarming, it was with the Sovietization of Lithuania in 1940 that an unprecedented, rabid anti-Semitism took hold. Lithuanian historian Vyngantas Vareikis (Liudas et al 2004: 120) prioritizes Lithuanian-Russian tensions as the impetus behind this rapid spread. Whatever the pre-existing perceptions of Jewish support for the Soviets, based on the disproportionately high number and level of influence of Jews in the Communist party, matters escalated severely after the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in August 1939. As a result of the Soviet-Nazi Non-Aggression Treaty, Eastern Europe was secretly partitioned into respective Russian and German spheres of influence (Greenbaum 2004: 288). Lithuania fell under Russian rule, but declared itself neutral. On September 18th, the Red Army occupied Vilna (as part of the pre-arranged plan with Germany), where the Jewish population numbered over 100,000. In October 1939, the Kremlin ordered Lithuania to sign a mutual assistance agreement allowing the Red Army to station a 50,000-man garrison force on its soil and to use its air bases. In exchange for these, the Soviets pledged to restore Vilna to the Lithuanian map. Any attempts to remain neutral were dashed with the acceptance of these terms (288). The return of Vilna triggered an overnight increase in the Jewish demographic, swelling its numbers to some

250,000 persons and, more importantly, reuniting families who had been split by the border for 18 years (Levin 2000: 189). Russian forces quickly established bases throughout Lithuania, especially along the German frontier and, in response to what it perceived as hostile acts – kidnapping of Red Army soldiers, spying on the Red Army to obtain military secrets, an unfriendly press—the Kremlin presented Lithuania with an ultimatum on June 15th, 1940, demanding the appointment of a new, Russia-friendly government, which would allow forces to enter without restriction. Split down the middle, with Smetona and his allies favouring rejection, the government finally voted to accept. A new People's Provisional Government, which included two Jewish members, was set up. Communists who had been imprisoned were freed, members of non-Communist government forces were interned or simply removed from public life. Free elections were held on July 15th, 1940 with a voter turnout of an unprecedented 95.1 per cent. The new Seimas was formed; only four out of eighty-five delegates were Jewish. Nonetheless, Jews held mass demonstrations in Yiddish in support of the new administration, mindful of the fact that their physical security would undoubtedly improve under Soviet watch. Days later, the Seimas petitioned to become part of the USSR. This was granted on 3rd August, clearing the way for Moscow to embark on the sweeping Sovietization of Lithuania. The country was renamed the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic and an indoctrination process, that touched every aspect of social, cultural, political and economic life, fast ensued: from the proletarianization of the entire Lithuanian population to the confiscation of land holdings; the nationalization of banks, industrial plants, and apartment complexes. Jews, alarmed by the prospect of Nazi rule, at the outset welcomed the Soviets, but the new regime swiftly ordered the dissolution of all Jewish organizations, parties and youth movements. Jewish libraries were closed, newspapers shut down. Of the 1,593 shops and businesses that were nationalized, over 80

per cent belonged to Jews (Levin, 2000: 194). Jewish leaders and members of the intelligentsia were arrested and imprisoned, among over 30,000 Lithuanians who were denounced as enemies of the state and deported to Siberia. Although some Jews were indeed Communists, and of high order, the majority were victims of Stalin's "terror apparatus" to the same, if not greater, extent as ethnic Lithuanians (Dean 2004: 124). This fact, however, was summarily overlooked by segments of the Lithuanian population for whom the period of Soviet occupation provided both justification and motivation not only for a radical anti-Semitism but for an active contribution to the Final Solution. An exaggerated impression of Jewish support for Soviet authorities, compounded by the complete overshadowing of Jewish suffering by the more pronounced sense of Lithuanian suffering at the hands of the Soviets, combined to create a circumstance of "competitive martyrology" (2005: 123), leaving little room for any real awareness of the impact of the Soviet occupation on Lithuanian Jewry.

Whatever hardships visited upon them by the Soviets, Jews had no recourse but to accept them as a last defence against the Nazis, a defence that was, in the end, unequal to the task. In the months preceding the invasion, the Lithuanian Activist Front, nationalistic, right-wing and anti-Soviet, supported by the Nazis, distributed leaflets throughout the country announcing:

The crucial day of reckoning has come for the Jews at last. Lithuania must be liberated not only from Asiatic Bolshevik slavery but from the long-standing Jewish yoke... Jews who are guilty of persecuting Lithuanians will be brought to trial. Those who manage to escape will be brought to trial. It is the duty of all honest Lithuanians to take measures by their own initiative to stop such Jews and if necessary, to punish them...The new Lithuanian state will be built by Lithuanians only. All Jews are excluded from Lithuania forever.. Let us prepare for the liberation of Lithuania and the purification of the nation (Greenbaum 1995: 304).

Their call was fully realized with the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi's surprise attack on the Soviet Union on 22nd June, 1941. Within days, the Lithuanian Activist Front formed a provisional government under Colonel Kazys Skirpa (still stationed in Berlin at the time) with pro-Nazi literary historian Jouzas Ambrazevicius as acting Prime Minister and Minister of Education and German collaborator, General Stasys Rastikis, as commander of the Lithuanian army (Greenbaum 1995: 306). The argument advanced by nationalist Lithuanian writers and historians in the decades since – that anti-Semitism was largely absent in Lithuania prior to the events of 1940 and that such feelings only emerged in response to the Jewish-Bolshvik collaboration and even then only among a small minority – is countered by the few Jews who emerged on the other side of the 'Catastrophe,' among them Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, one of a handful of Rabbis to survive the Kovno ghetto. He writes:

The Anti-Semitic element in the government brought down this institutional structure (Jewish national autonomy) and all that remained by the time World War II broke out was cultural autonomy—the religious and secular school systems under Jewish control. The climax came in 1941 when Lithuanians attacked the Jews with shocking cruelty, tortured and murdered them, killing innocent infants and the unfortunate ill, in indescribably horrible ways. German murderers finished the job. (1983: ix).



Figure 26. Honour guard, Lithuania, 2012.

Source: Lrytas.lt

In modern-day Lithuania, the myopic view of the past lingers. In May 2012, the remains of Juozas Brazaitis, head of the Lithuanian Provisional Government in 1941, were met by an honour guard at Kaunas airport and ferried to the cemetery where he was re-interred with a formal ceremony. Speaking at the event, the mayor of the city announced: “We as a nation should appreciate the efforts by our Provisional Government to restore national independence. It seems strange to me that while there is no official proof, they are trying to identify the honourable Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis with pro-Nazi activity.” In a pronounced illustration of the 'competitive martyrdom' Stone infers, he further stated: “Sure, the larger countries are trying in their own way to re-write history. Brazaitis himself also suffered from the Nazi as much as the Soviet aggression” (Lrytas.lt: 2012).



Figure 27. Destruction of a synagogue in Vilna.

Source: Levin, 2000.

For the Jewish families who, at first strike, scattered through the streets clutching their belongings only to be met at every turn by roving Lithuanian gangs who killed them on the spot or marched them to their deaths on the outskirts of town, there was no such day of honour. They were hunted and butchered as they fled. Synagogues were torched, Torah scrolls and Jewish books destroyed, the homes, businesses, and community centres they had built vandalized, their belongings snatched. As the Nazis advanced, the Red Army, poorly coordinated and ill-prepared, fled in a disorderly retreat, with some Jews, including Dobke and Rachel and her family, attaching themselves to passing units on their way out of the country. Others crowded aboard the last trains heading for the Russian border, only to be bombed on the tracks by German troops. Of approximately 240,000 Jews resident in Lithuania on the eve of the outbreak of war, less than 20,000 people survived.



Kaunas (Kovno): Lithuanian collaborators escorting Jews to execution sites



*Jews being tortured and killed by Lithuanians in the center of Kovno
as German soldiers and citizens look on, June 27, 1941*

Figure 28. Scenes of Jewish persecution in Kovno.

Source: Encyclopedia of Jewish Life, 2001

This then is the thwarted backdrop from which the individuals I met emerged. In each of them, I discovered glimpses of the complex and layered landscape of Jewish Lithuanian experience: Zionism, Communism, prayer houses and Yiddish groups, Bundist ideology and *Haskalik* thinking. Some are learned, intellectual, others from the

working, artisan classes. Some are heirs to Rabbinical dynasties, others to humanistic beliefs, and some to master tailoring skills. Some hail from cities, others from *shtetls*. What they hold in common is that they are among the few to have escaped with their lives, where many, if not all, of their family members did not. If we could capture a snapshot of these individuals exactly as they were in the moment that war broke out, we would find them thus:



Rachel Kostanian is a young girl in Siauliai. She hides behind the curtains in her living room, waiting to play a trick on her parents when they came home from work. “But when they came in, they looked so worried...”

Figure 29. Young Rachel Kostanian.



Dora Pillianskiene, a newlywed, looks around with pride at the home she had just decorated. She enjoys her work as a seamstress: “I loved my profession so much, that was my whole interest in life.’ As the bombs drop, she decides there is only one choice....”

Figure 30. ‘Dapper’ Dora Pilianskiene.



Berl Glazer, a teenager, is living with his grandmother. Days before the invasion, she dies. When the Germans arrive, he grabs a bicycle and rides across the country toward the Latvian border.

Figure 31. Berl Glazer.



Fania Brantsovsky returns from a teaching assignment across the border in Belarus to her family in Vilna. She is standing in the courtyard of her home on Pylimo Avenue with her younger sister Rivke. They are approached by a German soldier who asks them to sing a song. Fania stays silent, he points a gun at them, Rivke begins to sing...

Figure 32. Fania Brantsovsky and her family.



Chasia Spanerflig works with her husband Boris in a small garment factory he has opened. They are active members of Betar. She is pregnant with her first child, enjoying a happiness that “did not last long, that is like a moment.”

Figure 33. Chasia Spanerflig and Boris Fridman.



Josef Levinson has just graduated from university. He has excellent grades and a bright future, but sees the economic situation which is “so difficult and the state of people working also difficult and a lot of jobless people.” He is young and strong, and “seeing all this happening, all this social injustice,” he joins the pro-communist group of students. And as an avowed Communist, when war breaks out, he volunteers for the Lithuanian division in the Red Army.

Figure 34. Josef Levinson as a young soldier.



Figure 35. Trees at Ponar, 2008.

My Journey Begins in Ponar

I arrive in Vilnius on the morning of Sunday, 30th of August, 2008. As the first interviews are scheduled for the following day, our guide suggests a visit to Ponar/Ponary/Paneriai named, much like everything else in Jewish Lithuania, in triplicate: Yiddish, Polish and Lithuanian. One of the largest massacre sites in Eastern Europe, Ponar is a wooded area, six kilometres outside Vilnius on the Grodno highway. Once a popular holiday resort for urban dwellers, in 1941 the Soviets excavated a number of giant pits for use as storage tanks for airplane fuel. The work was abruptly interrupted by the German attack on the region on June 22nd. Thereafter, these craters were used as open graves for the 100,000 people, most of them Jews, who were herded to Ponar by foot, by road or by rail in groups of hundreds and sometimes thousands, shot to death on the edge of the pits, flung inside and covered with a layer of sand. This procedure occurred with ferocious regularity between July 1941 and July 1944, when the last few hundred Jews, discovered in the *malinas* (hiding places) in the Vilna Ghetto, were taken to Ponar and executed.



Figure 36. A German soldier stands guard over a pit while Jews are shot.

Source: Yad Vashem.



Figure 37. One of ten massacre pits in Ponar, 2008.

Having read Joan Isserman's account of a visit in 1961, during which she was overwhelmed by the "hoarse cries, the ever increasing, never ceasing raucous cries of the crows," I had expected to be greeted by noise (1967: 28). But on the day of my visit, there are no birds, no sounds at all. The parking lot, usually reserved for buses conveying heritage tourists, is empty. At the entrance, there is a large stone sculpture of the name *Paneriai* and behind it a memorial commemorating, in Lithuanian and Russian, "100,000 men, women and children from the city of Vilnius, murdered by the Nazis and their local collaborators." A second, smaller memorial lists "82 Lithuanians murdered." Only recently was a Jewish memorial, honouring in both Yiddish and Lithuanian the "70,000 Jews murdered at Ponar" added with donations from Jewish descendents of the Vilna ghetto.



Figure 38. Entrance to Ponar, 2008.



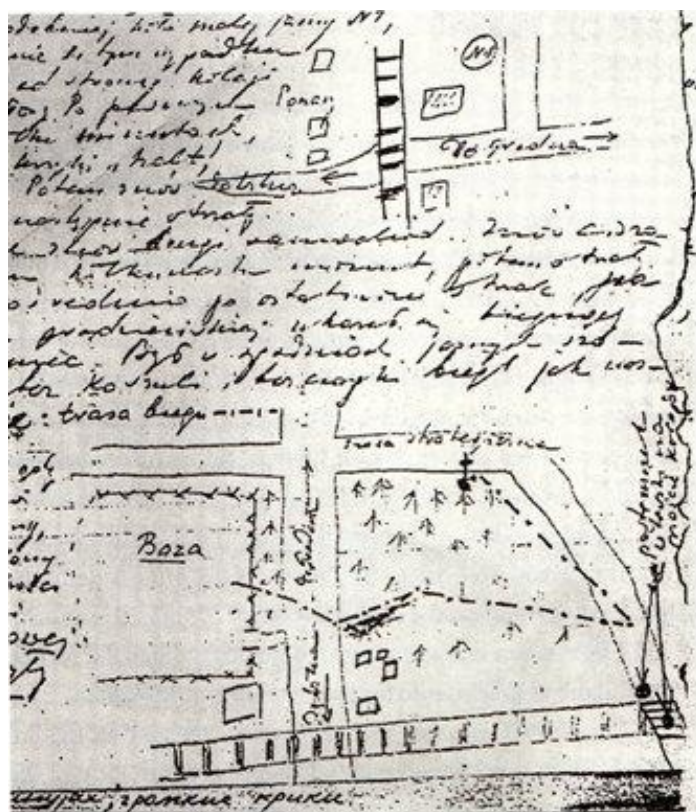
Figure 39. Railway track leading to Ponar, 2008.

We follow a broad path through the forest towards the pits. Standing beside the largest of these our guide explains how prisoners were held in a waiting area, then walked in single file to the edge. A train rattles by. The screech of its whistle, the clattering of its carriages catches him unawares. "It's that sound," he mutters, after a long silence, "the trains, they tell me what happened here." The trees and grass around me, I notice, are unusually verdant. Was it this that the poet, Myra Sklarew, meant when she wrote: "The weeds grew here, twice as tall as anywhere else... every hill is suspect, every ravine, every tree. If you put your foot down on the earth of Kedian or Datnuva or Ponar, if you stop walking and read the shape of the earth under your foot, you can feel the skull, or a bone of someone you knew, or almost remembered"(2000: 38).

What is known and remembered today about the events at Ponar is scant. Here, as elsewhere in the Holocaust record of Eastern Europe, we reconstruct from fragments: a negligible number of personal accounts by the few who escaped, such as that provided by William Gold. A teenager in the summer of 1941 on the way home from a weekly visit to the barber shop in central Vilna, he was apprehended by German officers and pushed onto a truck on the pretext that he was needed for work in Belorussia. Instead he was conveyed, along with 30 other young Jewish men, to Ponar. Of this experience, he recounts:

There is a huge mass grave excavated and ready for us. A few feet before the grave I fell in. The next victim they killed fell on top of me and soaked me with his blood. Machine guns sprayed the bodies in and around the grave. Not everyone was dead. I passed out and when I opened my eyes I moved my head and saw nobody. I ran to the gate. Two guards shot at me, but it was hilly terrain and they missed. I ran back to the grave, next to the barbed wire fence. My only chance was to dig underneath the fence. I dug with my bare hands. I didn't know how long it would take. I squeezed through and ran away. I was all bloody, in tatters from the barbed wire. On the road I met some Polish peasants, I told them my story. They were kind to me. I washed up. They gave me clothes and I went home (RG02/046-USHMM).

Notwithstanding the value of such personal testimonies, the most complete account of events at Ponar lies in the diaries of Polish journalist Kazimierz Sakowicz. Owner of a small publishing house in Vilna, Sakowicz and his wife relocated, during the Soviet occupation, to a frame cottage in the woods of Ponar situated adjacent to the fuel storage facility. On July 11th, 1941, the first day of the mass executions, he heard the sounds of gunfire from the direction of the airbase. From that day until his untimely death three years later – Sakowicz was found lying beside his bicycle in the forest on July 5th, 1944, having suffered a fatal gunshot wound – he recorded what he saw and heard: from his vantage point in his attic; from his daily rides back and forth to town; and from what he gleaned from neighbours in passing. He wrote in longhand on loose sheets which he placed in empty lemonade bottles which he then buried in the ground. After the war, these were dug up by neighbours and passed on to the Jewish Museum whose holdings were transferred to the Central State Archives when Lithuania fell once again under Soviet rule. Many years later, while employed as the director of the historical division of the Jewish State Museum, Rachel Margolis discovered a folder containing a number of handwritten yellowing sheets which appeared to have been penned in great haste “with a trembling hand” (2005: viii). Although these papers had been stamped ‘illegible,’ using special lighting, a magnifying glass, and her knowledge of the ‘Wilno’ dialect, Margolis was able to identify 16 documents which it would later transpire represented a mere fraction of the Sakowicz diary. Additional pages were unearthed in the Museum of the Revolution in Vilnius although even after Lithuanian independence in 1989 frequent requests by Margolis to view these were denied. Eventually in the early 1990s she was granted access for two days during which she photocopied feverishly before embarking on the gruelling task of deciphering the new material.



Page from Sakowicz's diary showing his drawing of the prisoner's escape route

Figure 40. A page from Sakowicz' diary.

Source: Arad, 2005

Sakowicz' diary is terse, numbering only 144 pages in the published English edition and this includes editor Yitzhak Arad's multiple notations and a foreword by Margolis. Yet, the text represents a valuable and unique testimony in the record of Jewish massacre, as no similar documentation exists – from the point of view of an objective bystander—for any of the other mass murder sites (Arad 2005: xvi). Sakowicz' writings, however rushed, elliptical and episodic in style allow us, as readers, to embark on the final journey of the Jews of Vilna into the valley of death that was Ponar. And it is in some sense the very matter-of-factness of his tone, the lack of personal identification with the victims that renders this chronicle so chilling, his perfunctory weather reports – July 11, *Quite nice weather, warm, white clouds, windy, some shots from the forest* (2005: 11) – providing a striking contrast to the obscenity of the actions undertaken on the ground as those indifferent 'white clouds' rolled by. In the very same entry he writes:

A large group of Jews taken to the forest, about 300 people, mainly intelligentsia with suitcases, beautifully dressed, known for their good economic situation. An hour later the volleys began. Ten people shot at a time. They took off their overcoats, caps and shoes (not their trousers). Executions continue on following days: July 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, a Saturday... A group (5 people) of Jews goes to the post for shovels. It turns out they are going to bury those shot yesterday. This goes on for a week (2005: 12).

Shoved like *schmattas* (old rags) into unmarked, open graves these individuals died, not only without the requisite burial rites –the washing of the body, the wrapping in a shroud, and for men, the dressing in a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and covering of the head – but also without witnesses (Pollock: 48). In this sense the Sakowicz text invites *us* now, as we read, to become the witnesses that historically failed to be there. And it is not just death itself that we acknowledge, but the incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of events through which these individuals were led to their deaths, all the while robbed of the knowledge of what awaited them. As Sakowicz describes:

Terrible Saturday, October 25, 1941:

Two trucks arrived. The condemned began to get nervous... weeping arose in the ranks. The Jewish women began to fall back. Then on the officer's orders the soldiers began to beat the women with their rifle butts. One woman said, 'I gave you all my money and you promised to let me and my child go, and now you lead me to death.' The soldier smiled. A second Jewish woman nineteen to twenty in a grey overcoat with a black fur collar, intelligent, with a boy about three to four in a navy blue coat, falls to the ground, full of mud, kisses the feet of the officer and begs for her life, grasps his muddy shoes, and pleads. To free his leg, he kicks her in the jaw with the tip of his shoe. On her torn cheek blood gushes out, mixing with the mud. She lies there and pleads spasmodically. The second soldier beats her with his rifle butt. She grabs the rifle butt, kisses it, kneeling on the earth at the entrance to the killing ground. The soldier snatches the crying boy, swings him around and throws him like a log past the wire; he raises his rifle butt to kill the boy. The woman rushes forward and runs past the

wire to shield the child. And when all is said and done this is what it was about, wasn't it? (2005: 35-36).

Sakowicz makes repeated reference to a 'brisk business' in clothing and to the greed with which Lithuanians, both guards and civilians, traded the personal effects of the murdered. On July 2nd, 1942 he writes:

The victims' effects were acquired by Rudzinski (a neighbour) for 5,000 rubles. He led me to his apartment and showed me a dark-blue precious stone with a little yellow mark which he found in the pocket of a coat of one of the people shot. The stone was hidden in the corner of the pocket and tied (with threads). The shoes of the murdered man were suede, a small size, evidently a small man. In addition I saw a black sheepskin coat, covered with grey material (why was the victim in a sheepskin coat in the summer? (2005:48).

On one afternoon in April 1943, over a four-hour period, 2,500 are murdered. Sakowicz recounts how the property of the condemned is offloaded from a wagon onto the ground: A mountain of things- food, pillows, mattresses, baby carriages, suitcases, kitchen equipment, sacks of potatoes, loaves of bread, clothes—all the stuff mixed together (Arad 2005: 75). In her recent text on the value and meaning of the Holocaust Object in Polish-Jewish culture, Bozena Shallcross surmises that the material legacy of the murdered attests “to the powerful human desire to live.” After all, she writes, “their owners carried these possessions to places of destination and destiny, as objects intended for use in a future life.” (2012: 2). The condemned whom Sakowicz witnessed on that April afternoon could not have known that where they were headed there would be no need for blankets, toys, suitcases or clothes.



Facsimile of the certificate Sakowicz included with his diary pages

[Written on the back:] Found on the road near the base from the direction of the main highway. Shot [the owner of the card] in October 1943.

Figure 41. Identity card.

Source: Arad, 2005.

Later that day, Sakowicz finds, “just before the hillock near my house,” a young Jew, fallen. He watches as a Lithuanian rifle butts him in the head. The man’s skull cracks open. The next morning Sakowicz returns to find the ground covered with brains. “We bury the brains,” he writes, “and find the identity papers—Hirsz Berkowski from Gudogaj” (Arad 2005:79). A mound of life accessories, a precious blue stone with a yellow glue mark, a pair of handmade suede shoes, a good suit, stained with blood, a disinfectant card discarded on the road, a little pile of brains splattered amongst the leaves: this is the record that remained.

During the first massacres, Jews in Vilna remained unaware of the happenings at Ponar or were, perhaps, not yet ready to countenance the possibility of such indiscriminate murder. Within days of the Nazi arrival in their city on June 24th, 1941, they were ordered to don yellow badges on their backs or chests, were forbidden to use the sidewalks, had to march single file, on the right side of the road, were subjected to nightly curfews, permitted only to buy food at certain times, and had any property of value confiscated. They were forbidden the use of parks, public transportation and recreational facilities, and called upon arbitrarily day or night to perform any job assigned by the Nazis. Notwithstanding these measures, many still believed that they were destined to live

(Shneidman 1998: 46-47). The ghetto librarian Herman Kruk, however, held a bleaker view. On June 24, he wrote a short note in his diary under the heading *Words From My Heart*:

There are no words for my suffering. This day has turned me into an old man. I want to be young, strong and persevering. To make it through. I want to and will make it through...but unless some miracle happens, everything really is lost...I put myself in the hands of fate and wear the yellow patch, as Christ wore the crown of thorns, this is how I shall go...(2002: 49).

Kruk's fears were borne out nine days later with the arrival of the Einsatzkommando 9, which launched the mass murder of Jews in earnest. German officers trawled the streets in armed vehicles, stopped outside Jewish homes, hauled the men out and ordered them to bring along a towel and soap, ostensibly for a few days work outside the city. They never returned. Thereafter men and boys were taken at random by the Germans or snatched by the *Ypatingas* – groups of armed young Lithuanian thugs dubbed the 'catchers' – (Shneidman 1998: 47; Kruk 2002: 57). N.M. Shneidman, a carefree 17-year-old at the time, later wrote of his shock at learning the fate of those apprehended by the 'catchers,' many of whom were former students from his Lithuanian high school (48). It was only with the incident now referred to as the Great Provocation that the true objective of these roundups was revealed.

On the afternoon of Sunday, August 31st, 1941, two Lithuanians in civilian attire barged into a Jewish home on the corner of Stiklu Street and launched a volley of gunfire from an upstairs window directly at a group of German soldiers standing across the street. They then ran from the house, screaming that the Jews had fired. Two Jewish men were hauled out, accused and shot on the spot. A public notice erected the following day stated:

Yesterday, Sunday afternoon shots were directed from an ambush at German soldiers in Vilna. Two of these cowardly bandits were identified—they were Jews. The attackers paid with their lives for their act- they were shot on the spot. To avoid such hostile acts in the future, new and severe deterrent measures were taken. (Arad 1982:102).

These 'new and severe deterrent measures' involved the incarceration of Jews from the Old Quarter at the Lukiski police station where they were relieved of their money and valuables, forced to relinquish the keys to their apartments and retained in an open courtyard without food, water or sanitary provisions before being transported to Ponar (Arad 1980: 103). In the aftermath of this massive roundup, news began to trickle back, starting with six wounded females, who had crawled out of the pits alive, and found their way to Vilna. They were rushed to a secret hospital where they were interviewed by Kruk, who recorded the meeting in his diaries:

With trembling hands I write the words. It sounds like an echo from the other world. Indeed that is what it is. What I describe here is truly a scream from the grave. The eleven year old child is Yidis Krojak. She has undergone an operation and I find her frightened and weak on a hospital bed. She tells me- 'they blindfolded us and stood us in front of a pit.' When I asked her how she could see the pit with blindfolded eyes she laughed cunningly: 'I adjusted the cloth like this so I could see... there in the pit lay a lot of dead bodies, whole mountains of them!' She was dragged out of the grave by a woman (2002: 89).

Even as he articulates these horrors, Kruk asks: "How can you write about all this, how can you collect your thoughts, when your world turns pitch black in the middle of the day and your house fills with dread?" (2002: 93). And yet, he continued to write. Standing by the very pits out of which these young girls crawled, I am reminded of the words of the Yiddish lullaby sung each night as darkness fell over the ghetto: *Shtiler, Shtiler*, (Hush, Hush)... *Many roads lead to Ponar, but no road leads back*. That fateful line proved true

for the 40,000 people, more than half the Jewish population of Vilna, executed within the first six months of the occupation. By year's end, Einsatzkommando leader Karl Jäger was able to report in his Final Summary of Executions that they had achieved the goal of "solving the Jewish problem in Lithuania," and that only "working Jews and their families" – 4,500 in Shavli, 15,000 in Kovno, and about 15,000 in Vilna – remained (RG557/5/136-146:YIVO). He cites "the cooperation of the Lithuanian partisans and the Civil Authorities" as crucial to the goal of clearing the country of Jews (Arad et. al 1987: 398). That 'cooperation' is outlined by Lithuanian historian Arunas Bubnys, based on testimony given after the war by members of the Special Police Squadron in Vilnius to Soviet interrogators. They describe how the Lithuanian Reserve was established in the first days of the war with the expressed mission: "to kill Jews" and how 1941 proved to be "the busiest year, with daily mass exterminations at Paneriai" (2008: 43). On September 23rd, 1943 all remaining Jews in the Vilna ghetto, by then numbering only several thousand, were rounded up and deported – some, including Kruk, to labour camps in Latvia and Estonia, others to the death camp at Sobibor, and the frail, the elderly, women and children to Ponar – in all over 50,000 beings exterminated from Vilna alone.

The remnants of their bodies are scattered now before me. In every direction: to the right and the left, in front and behind, in hollow pit after pit they lie, silenced. I walk again around the perimeter and think that it is fitting that my journey into the heart of Jewish Lithuania should commence here, at the precise geographic location, where that heart was ripped out. In his affecting novel, *An Unfinished Business*, exiled Algerian writer, Boualem Sansal exclaims: "nothing connects a man to the earth more than the graves of his parents and grandparents... Home is the country where your parents are buried (2011: 126). For the individuals I meet, it is not only parents and grandparents that they mourn, but children too. And I would discover, in speaking with them, that even

though they might have departed Lithuania for kinder, safer havens, they have elected to stay because they refuse to leave their loved ones behind. Each year on September 23rd, in commemoration of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto, they gather at Ponar, stand on the edge of the pits and remember.



Figure 42. Commemoration of the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto at Ponar.

Source: Brantsovsky



Figure 43. Soil from Ponar, 2008.

Just as Creates was guided towards the natural souvenirs of her ancestral legacy, just as she found in them a hint, a trace of her “poetic inheritance” (Creates 1997: 5), I, too, search for mine. I bend down and run my fingers through the earth, remembering Benjamin’s guidance to the person seeking a buried past – to “scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil” (2007: 1). I turn the earth over and over and I think that if history is what happens to people, then I am holding history between my fingers. And somehow the sensation of digging my hands into this earth, here at Ponar, is not what I had anticipated. The soil is not dense and dark, weighted down with tissue and muscle, seeped with blood, but rather delicate, almost flimsy, covered with grass, and scattered with small rocks and pebbles, sticks and acorns. My fingers brush against

something hard, round, and unusually smooth. Could this, I wonder, be the nub of bone, the *luz* that Grossman speaks of? I turn this small hard thing over in my hand and have the distinct impression that, with these actions, I am plundering souls, disturbing their peace. What right have I to remove what little is left? The words form in my mind: 'can I carry away a small bag of earth to remind others of what happened here?' It is possible that I imagined this, but a second or two after the question is posed, a soft breeze flutters about me. I am aware then of a stillness: so steady, so peaceful that it feels like a permission to take a handful of soil with me. I place it in a bag, seal it and turn to walk away.

From behind I hear the sound of footsteps and notice an old woman ambling through the forest, pushing a cart – out for a day's stroll, taking a short cut? Deeper in the woods a family gathers for a day's outing, some fresh air, a picnic perhaps? I approach and ask them if they know what happened here. They glance at me, confused. The English artist Pam Skelton, also of Litvak descent, who created the installation/visual archive *Dangerous Places: Ponar* describes how during a visit in 1993 she also wandered “in these woods, with local families on bicycles on an outing” (Pollock 1996: 50). As a site of mass murder then, Ponar is both a location and a dislocation, a memory of horror and, at once, a horror of forgetfulness (Skelton 1995: 9). The teenagers I meet near the entrance to the woods, the Polish man I stop by the railway tracks, the families whose homes abut the forest – none of them can tell me the history of this place. So who attends now to the memory of all the things we might have known, seen and heard had they not been consigned to this earth?



Figure 44. 'Pit of escape' at Ponar.

Source: Encyclopaedia of Jewish Life, 2001.

For all the stress on the process, event and unfinished business of death that Ponar conjures, it is also resolutely about the living (Pollock: 52). Before we leave, the guide insists that I follow him to what has, in legend, become known as the Pit of Escape. As part of the German campaign to obliterate traces of earlier mass murders, eighty Jews were singled out for 'special work' at Ponar. Wearing leg irons, they were housed in an underground bunker, the only access to which was by a ladder which was hauled up each evening after the prisoners were inside. The bunker was surrounded by a barbed wire fence and a minefield. The unit was put to work opening the mass graves, removing the corpses, then stacking them in large piles and burning them (Arad 1982: 123). Operation 1005, as it was code-named, resulted in the exhumation and cremation of more than 58,000 bodies. Knowing that they too would be murdered once their work was completed, the prisoners toiled for three months, using their hands and spoons, filling their pockets

with sand at night, then scattering it on the ground as they worked during the day, to dig a tunnel from the pit, under the fence and the minefield and out into the forest. On the night of April 15th, 1944, they removed their leg irons and 40 men managed to crawl into the tunnel before the guards opened fire. Twenty-five were killed instantly. Fifteen escaped into the forest where they joined the partisans; the remaining 40 were murdered five days later (Skelton 1995: 10). On the edge of this pit, amid the stones and the rubble I find a single white daisy, a fragile memorial to the spirit of those who died here.



Figure 45. Single white daisy, Ponar, 2008.



Figure 46. 'Pit of escape', Ponar, 2008.

Months after this visit, when I sit in my study with the materials I have gathered – the interview transcripts, the photographs, the biographical items and artefacts, the archival documents and the small traces of Lithuania that I have carried back with me – the visual refrain of those pits, stretching out one after another, returns to me as an image metaphor which seems to hold this entire research process as if the collective history of the Jews of Lithuania is contained, symbolically and metaphorically within a vast pit. Their stories sift and seep through its earth. When spoken aloud, those stories rise up out of that earth and blow like topsoil through the lives and into the souls of those who cross their paths. Tiny clumps cling to the folds of our clothes and to the bottom of our shoes, long after the sounds of the stories have faded. The pits at Ponar, for me, serve as both departure and destination. I did, in actuality, begin at Ponar, and I find my point of departure into the world of Lithuania's Jews, the living and the dead, in the imagery of its vast pits. Skelton writes, "Ponar is a place where people went to, but did not return from... This is why I have to tell of it" (1995: 9). My journey begins in Ponar. Unlike the many

who perished there, I can take the road back. That road leads me directly to Vilnius: to Chasia, to Fania, to Rochel, to Josef, Dobke, and Berl whose mothers, fathers, grandparents, babies, aunts, uncles, nieces, cousins, sisters and brothers lie in the pits of Ponar.



Figure 47. Jewish artifacts collected in Vilnius, 2008.

The Mourner, the Memory Bearers and the Creatives



The Mourner: An Eternal Tear



Figure 48. Chasia's memory box. Artist: Katie Dell Kaufman./ Surviving History exhibition

It fits neatly into the palm of my hand. It is smooth, round and plastic-like against the skin. Amber in colour, it is flecked through with hints of gold and has, at its centre, an uneven island shape which when held up to the light gives the impression of an embedded wound. At the back this shape is coarse and rough to the touch, like a raised scar.



Figure 49. Chasia's amber pendant.

This is the biographical object that Chasia Spanerflig has elected to give me as a self-representation. Why, I wondered, of all the things in her possession, has she decided upon this item? What of its owner and her world might this amber pendant, barely an inch in diameter, reveal? And through what means might I presume to extract testimony, data or history from it? Anthropologist Janet Hoskins argues that people and the things that they value are so intertwined that they cannot be disentangled. “To know the thing is to know the person” (1998: 2). Bourdieu believed that identity can be located in all properties with which individuals elect to surround themselves, such as furniture, houses, painting, books, cars, clothing, perfume...(1984:173). Yet, Jewish cultural theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett inquires of the “moon rocks, a few small strips of meat, dried Hidatsa-style before 1918, dust from Jerusalem and a knot tied by the wind in a

storm at sea” that she once encountered in a museum display: “Why save, let alone display things that are of little visual interest? Why ask a person to look closely at something whose value lies somewhere other than its appearance?” (1998: 17). Although Chasia’s pendant is more visually compelling than an antiquated strip of dried meat, it is not visual interest which renders this ethnographic fragment so relevant, rather the accretion and complexity of experience with which it is weighted. Objects are in themselves a kind of history, siphoning off emanations of both the permanence and the fleetingness of the past. Entering us through our senses, they are everywhere, such that it is possible to regard the entire universe: its rivers and landscapes, buildings, people, artworks and everything in it as a potentially infinite source of data, if only we were in possession of the tools through which to read and interpret it (Kwint et al 1999: 2). What then are those tools and how might we apply them?

Walter Benjamin, according to his contemporary, Theodor Adorno, was known to have been enamoured of the kind of glass baubles which enclose snow-blanketed landscapes and which, on being shaken, awaken a tumbling new life (Leslie 1999: 119). In his piece *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Benjamin transforms the entire cosmos into one such bauble. “Sometimes in winter,” he writes, “standing in a warm room, at a window, the flakes of snow told silent stories to me...” (in Leslie 1999: 120). Just as Benjamin’s snowflakes flurry with story, as historian Rebecca Solnit follows the track or ‘*shul*’, the mark that remains after that which has made it has passed by, to invoke people and places of the past (2006: 51), and as the Hassidic masters charge each aspect of the tangible and the material with meaning, I too ask the objects I have been given to speak to and through me.

Chasia found this pendant after she had emerged from the ghetto: “once upon a time in a market, in the section where they make such things.” I can imagine her

approaching a stall, casting her gaze over the pieces of jewellery displayed, touching this, then that, alighting finally on *her* amber pendant. Was it the colour, the shape, the size that spoke to her, or the feel of it in her hand? Some objects, writes de Waal, retain the pulse of their making, invite touching or handling and emit a kind of warmth (2010: 16). Was it so with this amber pendant? Or perhaps it was on account of the promise it held, after such personal horror, of a more ordinary life as a young woman, with the usual rituals and concerns of adornment and prettification? Or was it something else entirely... maybe what the craftswoman said when Chasia asked her, “What is the meaning of this piece?” and she replied: “This is nature crying.”

When Chasia hands the pendant to me, she tells me: “This is a tear, for my closest ones, for my family, who died not knowing the reason why, especially the little children who went to their deaths because they were born Jews. This is my 'eternal tear.'” When I take the pendant in my hand, I am struck by the notion that more than the item itself, it is the process through which amber is conceived that resonates most closely with Chasia’s experience. Baltic amber has been oozing out of trees in the region for fifty million years. Comprised of natural resin, in its fresh form the amber collects insects, leaves, twigs and other fauna in its sticky clutches, where over time they become hardened and fossilized and are preserved, visually intact, for thousands of years. Some amber clumps, it is thought, might even harbour samples of ancient DNA (Baltic Amber: Gold of the North, 2008). In this regard amber, as a material deposit, seems a fitting metaphoric container for Chasia’s experience; both are ancient, undeniably Baltic substances, shot through with the cultural shards and the legacies of the past. What then is Chasia's past?



Figure 50. Chasia at her home in Vilnius in 2008.

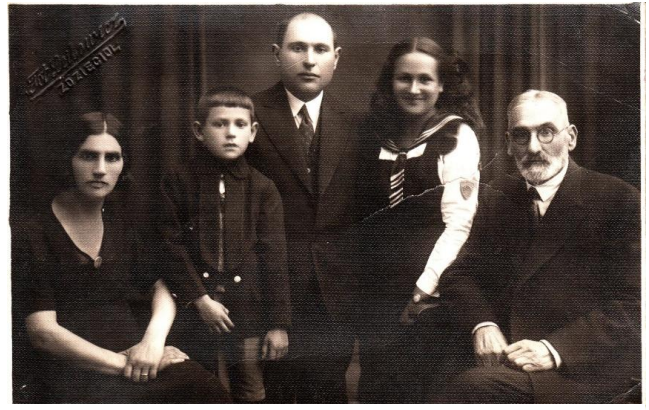


Figure 51. Chasia with her brother and parents, 1930s.
Source: Spanerflig

When we sit for the interview in the bedroom-cum-living-room she shares with her disabled son, Chasia asks me: “What can I tell you about myself? I am an antique.” Over the next few hours, she recreates a vivid portrait of life in the small Polish *shtetl*, Katzburg, a few miles outside Vilnius into which her father Avraham, a teacher, her mother Peisa, a paramedic, and she and her brother were born. She describes her family as “not rich, but not poor either, intelligentsia, middle class” and evokes a home which flourished with books and learning, where Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish were all spoken.

Ours was a house of two camps, mother’s and fathers’: mother’s was supportive of the proletariat, making sure orphans had enough to eat, helping poor young girls find good husbands, sending children with TB to health camps, whereas father’s was concerned with the work of great Jews in the world, studying Jewish history and biblical works and supporting the foundation of the state of Israel. We had such a great atmosphere at home.

In 1933, as a result of a fire which consumed most of their settlement, Chasia's parents sent her to Vilna to live with her aunt and to attend the famed *Tarbut* Academy. The city into which this twelve-year old girl stepped was, according to Lucy Dawidowicz, one in which “there was always something going on... a world-famous Zionist leader came to speak, a Yiddish school putting on its annual children’s show, a

visiting poet from Warsaw feted with a public poetry reading; the Jewish symphony orchestra holding a concert, a Jewish scholar from Lodz delivering a lecture..” all attended by young and lively audiences (1989: 120). It is little surprise then that when Lithuania regained control of Vilna in 1939, Chasia, already a mature eighteen-year-old, opted to stay there rather than return home to her parents. By then, she explains, “I was a city girl. Vilna for me had already become the Jerusalem of Lithuania, that is [...] a great centre of Jewish culture and life, and in those regards, in regard to religion, to patriotism to Israel, to education of the youth, to culture, I couldn’t return back to my township.”



Figure 52. Photo of Chasia aged 18.

Source: Spanerflug

Given the prominence that Chasia affords her Jewish heritage – the frequency with which she mentions the Hebrew and Yiddish languages, Biblical stories and personalities, the land of Israel – throughout her testimony, it occurs to me as I hold up the amber pendant, that the tiny flecks glinting out at me are as symbolic traces of this ancient legacy, and that solidified in its resin is the timeless, everlasting history of her people. And just as this small clump of amber harbours the essence and the memories of dust and insects, of shavings and twig and bark, barely but still visible, so too this woman who identifies herself as an antique, a relic, houses within the DNA of this ancient

people, its stories, songs and wise sayings, its languages, traditions and beliefs, etched into her body and across her soul. And if the speckles of tawny light along the periphery of this amber piece represent aspects of ancient Jewish tradition, then the uneven shape at its core is surely the wound embedded at the heart of that tradition, fossilized and calcified over time. At Chasia's core there is a similar wound.



Figure 53. Chasia and Boria shortly after they met.

Source: Spanerflug

Her decision to stay in Vilna saved her from the fate that would soon befall her parents and the inhabitants of her *shtetl*. But it also set in motion a train of events that would ultimately lead her to a choice, the consequences of which have haunted her since. On a summer's evening in 1939, Vladimir Jabotinsky gave a lecture in Vilna. Reading Dawidowicz' account (1989: 157) of a hall festooned with Revisionist banners, and members of *Betar* marching in as an honour guard, and of Jabotinsky himself, no longer the spellbinder he'd once been, yet nonetheless, mesmerizing when he spoke, the packed audience responding to his every inflection, it is not hard to imagine an eager Chasia entering the crowded theatre, and inching her way toward one of the few remaining free

spaces against the back wall. Beside her stood a tall, dark-haired man. “There were no free seats,” she explains, “and we stood next to each other at the wall. We were young, we started chatting to each other, and left the hall together, he walked me home....” This ‘young’ man, as it turned out, was actually 13 years Chasia’s senior, “but looked much younger and was full of life.” Born in 1907 to wealthy parents, and trained in France as a textiles engineer, Boris Fridman was a close friend of Jabotinsky’s and already a supporter of armed struggle. Today, at the Green House Jewish Museum, there is a striking photo of Boris Fridman, taken around the time that Chasia would have first encountered him. It is not hard to understand, on a purely physical level, what might have drawn her towards him. Beyond that, she explains, “he was a very interesting man, he had a wonderful inner world, so educated and knowledgeable. I was so attracted to being with him. Compared to these little boys I had studied with, this was a man who actually brought you to a new life, to a new level...”

Remembering his first words to her, Chasia says: “He asked me, much as you are asking me now, where I had come from, what and who I was, and then he told me, ‘You don’t have to leave Vilna, I will help you, you will stay here.’” On 13th October 1939, Chasia and Boris were married in a makeshift synagogue in a house on Petrasyska Street; by then most official synagogues had been closed. Her parents travelled up from Ziatlova for the *chuppah*, and afterwards they said their goodbyes, her family back to the *shtetl*, she and Boris to her in-laws’ house on Zubotch Street. Boris set up a small garment factory, specializing in what Chasia describes as short mountain jackets; she helped out with the books until their first child, Velvel, named for his paternal grandfather, was born. This, Chasia says, “was a time of happiness... We actually had a very good life, and this land became Lithuania, it became Lithuania... but as the Yiddish saying goes,

happiness is like a moment. The Soviets took over and then war broke out... I was with my family over here. My relatives were over there.”

This pre-war phase to which Chasia alludes only fleetingly is described by Yitzhak Arad, the famed partisan and former Yad Vashem director, as a period of major upheaval for Vilna’s Jews. Under Lithuanian rule, they suffered a new wave of anti-Semitic activity; during the subsequent one-year Soviet rule, they were subjected to widespread Sovietization and mass deportations as a result of which, Jews of all persuasions – Rabbis, artists, intelligentsia, Bundists, Zionists – sought refuge on foreign soil. Some 6,500 exit visas were issued between March 1940 and May 1941, at which point the issue of permits abruptly terminated (1982: 25). When German troops entered a month later, panic spread among Vilna's Jews. Chasia recalls: “We were terrified to go out, you know..., people were being snatched in the streets and taken away...we understood it was bad, because it was a war, but we never... ever thought it would turn out the way it did.”

By the time we reach this juncture in the interview, the small room in which we are seated is almost dark. As Chasia speaks, her voice drops several octaves and when, for an instant, I glance in her direction, I see that her eyes are clenched shut. How do we listen to and honour another’s anguish? Jackson suggests that “in sharing stories, we affirm life in the face of death, rejoining the dead to the living, and ourselves to one another.” For life to be brought back to the frozen world of the past, he says, the narrator must tell his story, but not as a repetition of events as they occurred, as this may perpetuate the terrible stasis, but as a story that breaks free of the past into new understanding. This new understanding takes the narrator beyond himself and involves a common bond with others (2006: 58). Is it enough that I am here, that I listen?

Sociologist Naomi Rosh White stresses that in listening to survivor testimony, we are often left with the sense that language is inadequate to express or contain the complex, anguished mental imagery of the survivor. Yet, we must continue to listen for the enslavement of a citizenry begins, she contends, when its members are not only denied their memories but an audience for those memories (1998: 181). So I ask again: is listening enough? Dori Laub, who had written extensively on Holocaust memory, proposes the rightful 'listening position' as one in which the interviewer is, paradoxically, 'unobtrusively present,' as survivors beginning to remember often desire to be alone, although at the same time, very much in someone's presence. And because there is so much death, loss, hopelessness and destruction recounted, there has been "an abundance of holding and of emotional investment in the exchange, to keep the narration alive" (1992: 71). This is what I experience with Chasia; she is here in the room with us, but also somewhere else alone.

On 6th September, 1941, Chasia, Boris, Velvel, Boria's parents, his brother, sister-in-law and their small daughter Sofia were forced into the Vilna Ghetto. At the time, Chasia says: "We knew nothing, we had no idea what a ghetto was... we just considered ourselves lucky that we were not sent to the jail or to Ponar, like the rest." They settled in a room on Rudinko Street with 25 others, many of them children. Each night German officers entered with torches, to check row by row, curled body by curled body, shooting at random over the slightest perceived infraction: a swift movement, an escaped word, a few crumbs discovered. "And thus," Chasia says, "our life in the ghetto began."

Every morning, Boris, his brother and their father were sent to work on the outside. On good days, they returned with a slice of stale bread, a lump of sugar, a rotten carrot, pressed into their hands by strangers in passing. Eventually Boris' brother and his wife escaped to the nearby town of Oshnyanu, leaving Sofia behind in Chasia's care. An

'*aktion*' (rounding up and shooting of Jews) broke out on the day of their arrival; they were among the first Jews murdered. Back in Vilna, Chasia, now with two children to tend to, tried to remain hopeful.

We were cold, we were always hungry, but the worst thing of all was the fear, especially when they were surrounding the ghetto and rounding people up, mostly the children and the elderly. Our children didn't cry; they kept so quiet, but people were being killed for the smallest reasons, smuggling a piece of bread, or a log of wood, for any little thing. It was extremely hard. But we hoped and tried to believe, we tried to stay as human beings...

Yitshok Rudashevski, the young ghetto diarist, 13 at the time, records a similar sentiment in his journal entry in the first days of the occupation: "We are like animals surrounded by the hunter. The hunter is on all sides beneath us, above us... broken locks snap, doors creak, axes, saws... I feel the enemy under the boards on which I am standing" (2002: 195). Yet, on the occasion of his fifteenth birthday, a year later, he adopted a more hopeful tone:

I decided not to trifle my time away in the ghetto on nothing and I feel somehow happy that I can study, read, develop myself and see that time does not stand still as long as I progress normally with it... today I became fifteen years of age and I live confident in the future. I am not conflicted about it and see before me sun and sun and sun... (217).

In listening to Chasia speak of the desire to remain human, in reading Rudashevski's entry on turning 15, I am reminded of Frankl's contention that it is possible to find meaning in one's life, even when confronting a fate that cannot be changed (2004: 113). This human capacity to preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom under the direst conditions, reflected again and again in Chasia's testimony, was echoed

in a recent interview with Helga Weisssova-Hoskova, an 82-year-old painter and camp survivor. Just 12 years-old when her home in Prague was confiscated by the Germans, she and her family were transported by cattle car to Terezin, the transit hub for Jews awaiting deportation to Auschwitz. The last words her father uttered to her before being taken away were: “Whatever happens, we must remain human, so that we do not die like cattle.” Despite the deprivations, the hunger and disease endemic in the camp, Terezin became a hub of Jewish culture and creativity. In explanation, Weisssova-Hoskova offers: “I think that the will to create was an expression of the will to live and to survive as human beings” (Vulliamy 2010).



Cultural department
of the Jewish Council
Sun[day], 1942, April 26]

**Ghetto Theatre
OPENING**

(in the for[mer] Small Town Hall, Arkliq St. 3
Entrance – Rüdinku' St. 6.)

Programme:
A. Leyeles² – Shloime Molcho (fragment)
Sholom Aleichem² – Greetings (one-act)
Soloists' and small Symphony Orchestra's
concert part

Starts promptly at 7 in the evening
Doors locked once the play begins

Tickets sold at the newspaper kiosk at Dysnos⁴
St. 2 daily from 4 in the afternoon until 7 in the
evening. On the day of the play [...] from 12 to 2
and from 4 to 6

Figure 54. Vilna Ghetto posters.
Source: Kostanian, et . al., 2005

That "will to create" found multiple expressions in the Vilna Ghetto. "We ran a school, we had composers, and poets. We had an orchestra, we had a theatre as well," Chasia recalls proudly. "In short we tried to keep up, not to lose our culture. When one loses one's culture, one loses oneself. We tried to be as human beings..." Tangible evidence of these activities surfaces in the collection of original ghetto posters, compiled by Rachel Kostanian in 2005, which includes: handwritten announcements for a lecture series on Jewish history, posters for Children's Hannukah Celebrations, theatre productions, musical evenings, art exhibitions and many more. For the writers, directors, musicians, composers, singers, artists behind these posters, Kostanian contends, "every lecture, every joke, every concert weighted on the life death scale" (2002: 87).

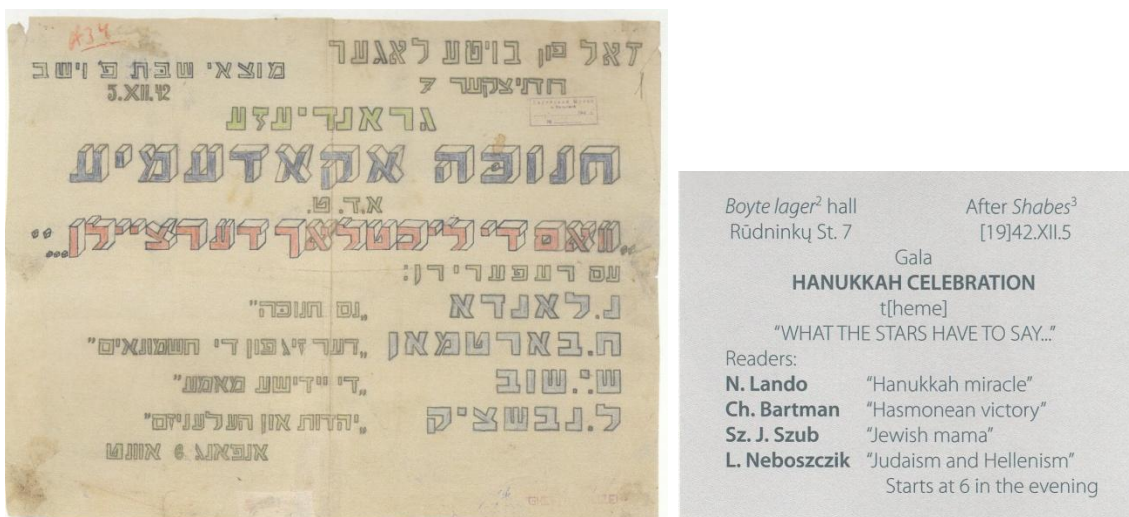


Figure 55. Vilna Ghetto poster for Chanukah celebration, 1942.

Source: Kostanian, et . al., 2005

Chasia, a twenty-two year old mother of two in the winter of 1942, joined the ghetto choir and at Chanukah made a special effort to dress up and curl her hair for the celebrations. "We had this one famous Yiddish song," she remembers, "and at the Chanukah party, we were all singing together: *Never say it's your last journey [...] Our time will come and we will say, 'yes, we are still here.'*" For Boris, however, singing was

not enough. By Chasia's account, her husband was an "intelligent organizer, a fighter... a man who was thinking about the future, and who decided that after what had happened with the Warsaw uprising the only path was revenge." The details of what ensued are sketchily pieced together by Michael Bart in his book *Until Our Last Breath* which documents his own parents' involvement with the resistance movement. In it, he describes the formation of a small underground faction, The Struggle Group, under the leadership of Boris Fridman who, in April 1943, led a 13-man unit into the Rudnicki forest (2008: 133).



Figure 56. Boria a.k.a. Borka Fridman as a partisan.

Source: Leyzer Ran

Chasia pinpoints the precise moment, just before midnight, on the 14th of April, 1943, when 'my Boria' arrived home and announced: "I am leaving. In half an hour I will be gone. Don't ask me any questions. My comrades will tell you everything. I am going to get my revenge." When I inquire about her reaction, she says: "I knew nothing of his plans, this was a big, big secret... he felt the younger ones should fight, pay the Germans back, blow up trains, bring their downfall closer.. We didn't have time to say goodbyes in the ghetto. There was no room for emotions...he told me he would try and save us, and then he left... how, from what exit, with whom, I do not know."

Chasia was aware, however, that Boris' escape placed her, her in-laws, and her children in grave danger, as the authorities had announced that family members of those who attempted to flee would be shot. At nine o'clock, the following morning there was a loud knock (by then they had moved into the rooms of a murdered family at 7 Strashun Street). The ghetto militia broke through the door and shouted:

Family Fridman, are you here?! Father Fridman, Mother Fridman, Wife of Fridman, Children of Fridman, all outside!

They were led to a jail a few doors down, right beside the Strashun library where they were installed in a small cell. At midnight the Gestapo arrived with a truck to transport prisoners to Ponar.

It was like that... from 9:00 in the morning until 11:30 that night, we were sitting around, waiting for our death. The children were crying, we had no food, we weren't given anything but water, we went to the toilet right there in the same tiny cell. That was the most difficult day of my life, both kids hungry, cold, but they didn't cry, they didn't sleep. There were many people in that cell with us, just standing and waiting for a bullet from the Gestapo... and we just sat there silent, without any thoughts, waiting for them to come and shoot us. We thought the sooner death comes, the better. At just after 1:00 a.m. the door opened, and we heard a voice: Family Fridman, come with us. We had a very good idea where we were headed.

Miraculously, these were no ordinary policemen, but members of Boris' group who had come to smuggle his family out. They led them to a *malina*, also on Strashun Street, locked the doors behind them and left. Every few days thereafter, they would return with food parcels. After a period of three weeks, by which time the ghetto militia had more pressing matters to concern them, Chasia and her family were informed that it was safe to return to their rooms. All the while, she awaited news of Boris.

Herman Kruk's diary entry on May 5th captures the prevailing mood: "The sword hanging over our heads constantly oppresses and torments. All of our predictions about events in the Vilna provinces have unfortunately been correct. Now, more than ever before we stand with ears pricked up and eyes alert to everything taking place" (2002: 529). And a few weeks later on May 25th: "All our prophecies are coming true. There will be more 'aktions' in the ghetto, there must be. It is only a question of when and how big..." (550). Amid such escalating fear, the remaining members of Boris' faction decided to send out a second unit. Chasia was summoned to a room on Mesiniu Street where she was met by several comrades. It was then that she discovered her husband's fate. He had handed over money for arms to a group of White Poles who, rather than deliver the weapons, had ambushed his defenceless unit. As commander, he was the first to fall. Only one member had escaped to return with Boris' dying words: that Chasia *must* be taken out with the second unit, "with her child if possible, but if not, alone." After they'd told her of Boris' demise, the partisans presented Chasia with an ultimatum: "If you agree, we leave now, and close the doors behind us, never to see your children or family again. Either you come with us right now, or you go home. That's the final word."

"Can you imagine," Chasia asks, "I was 48 kilos. Only my hair was left, two big braids. So, I was standing there alone, and thinking, thinking, but what could I be thinking? ... What should I do? Should I leave the children and parents behind? Should I rescue myself? Or if not, we would all be, you know.... then they said again this is the moment that you have to make your decision. Yes or No. I closed my eyes and said, 'Yes, I go with you....' I thought maybe by some miracle, I would meet my Boria alive. Maybe I'd be able to save the family...maybe...."

Chasia's voice trails off. Her eyes are still closed. An unbearable weight descends upon the room. Finally, I ask: "if you had the chance to do it over, would you make the

same decision?” She answers without hesitation, without opening her eyes: “I wouldn’t go... Because this stays with me and tortures me all my life. It tortures me all my life.”

Chasia escaped on the 15th of September. Eight days later, the ghetto was liquidated, and “all – mother, father and both children were transported to Ponar and shot...” When she has finished speaking, there follows the kind of suffocating silence that Sarah Kofman infers in her book, *Smothered Words*, when she writes of a “silence like a cry, without words, mute, although crying endlessly” (1987: 11). Chasia eventually opens her eyes. Across her face flit a thousand agonies. After a long interval, she says: “Maybe I’m a bad mother, maybe I’ve committed a big sin in my life...that was the destiny chosen for me, my fate... Those two moments in my life – the day in the prison and then making that decision- life or death, they left a big hole in my heart. And I am asking you now, would you make the same choice as me? Tell me, was my decision the right one? What do you think?”

I tell her: “I don’t pass judgement.”

“But I judge,” she answers.

She carries on talking about life in the forests – cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, caring for wounded partisans, hiding in a freshly-dug grave on top of the dead as German troops trampled the area, but also of the kindness of partisans towards her and, even humourously, of the unit commander who tried, in vain, to show her how to drink moonshine. She speaks of her own parents, the fate of whom she would only discover much later, her father murdered within minutes of the Germans entering Ziatolova, her mother and brother escaping to the forest, where Peisa nursed the sick, but eventually succumbed to cold and hunger. She speaks of how her unit marched through Vilna after liberation to discover a city emptied of life and of, one day, meeting a man from the forest, by chance, and “because he had nowhere to go” inviting him to share her flat and

how he had become her second husband. She tells us of her life after the war, the two new children, a girl and a boy, named Velvel and Sofia for the ones she had lost. She speaks of the untimely death of her husband Mikail and her struggles to raise the children alone and finally of her determination to remain in Vilnius even after her daughter had emigrated to America, explaining: "I have stayed here, this was my decision. I did not want to go because this is where my children died, where my parents died. Actually I come from two families—Langbort (her own family) and everybody died, and family of Fridman (Boris' family) died. So I didn't want to survive. I didn't want to rescue myself and find a better place. I wanted to be here."

Through it all, there is a sense that this unburdening is extracting from her an inordinately high toll. The visible despair she exhibits seems to confirm Langer's contention that anguished memory can imprison the consciousness it attempts to liberate and that rather than proving redemptive, telling can become detrimental for the survivor (1991: 40). What then of the 'soul expansion' of teller and listener upon which this research had been predicated? Langer stresses the importance of moving beyond a vocabulary (words such as redemptive, salvation, etc.) "that prods us away from the event towards a consoling future" (2), for such accolades, he argues, do not honour the painful complexities of the victim's narratives or reflect the ambivalent nature of their trials in the ghettos and camps. For Chasia then, has this foray into Langer's 'ruins of memory', this calling up of an embattled inner dialogue and reliving of an action by which she herself continues to be horrified only deepened her agony? How best to receive a testimony such as hers, to honour rather than simplify her dilemma? Had my response—"I do not pass judgement"—no matter how well meaning and congruent, merely plunged her further into guilt?

These questions nag at me on the way back from the interview. I seek comfort in Laub's position which, in contrast to Langer's, suggests that it is, in fact, essential for the narrative that cannot be articulated to be transmitted, to be heard, so that the survivor should not bear alone the weight of the past (1992: 85). Jackson likewise stresses that those who have suffered should not have to bear, together with their pain, the burden of our collective history (2006: 58). Avishai Margalit contends that making the traumatic, the repressed open, explicit and conscious has a healing power (2002: 5). Yet for all the writings that point to the restorative possibilities inherent in Holocaust recounting, I cannot shake the sense that with Chasia I have pierced too deeply. I am not surprised therefore when, several hours later, I receive a call from Ruta to say that Chasia has taken ill after her session and is unable to meet us at the Community Centre where she volunteers the following day as planned. Perhaps I experience the kind of psychic disturbance Laub refers to whereby the listener comes to be a co-owner of the traumatic event, partially experiencing the trauma in himself (1992: 57). Perhaps I am overtired, or overwhelmed by the whole experience, but I find myself utterly distraught at the news, not at the prospect that access to my subject has suddenly been denied and that we will be unable to *get* our story, but at the idea that I have reactivated Chasia's pain to the point where she herself is ill-equipped to temper it. I return to her interview tape and listen anxiously, arriving over and over at the point in her story where she explains how she has tried to give the children – Velvel and Sofia – from her second marriage 'everything,' even selling her apartment, leaving herself without a home, so that they would have a place of their own to live. I had asked her if in doing so she was attempting to make right the earlier decision. She told me: "You see I am in debt to my children. I survived only because of my children. I sacrificed my children to survive, so now I sacrifice myself. I do everything for my children. I don't have a life; this is my fate. This is my pain."

This is my pain...

In his essay *Shame*, Primo Levi reflects not only on the guilt experienced by individual survivors, whose lives may have come at the cost of others, but on the “vaster shame, the shame of the world... the atavistic anguish of an abandoned Creation” (Greenspan 1998: 31). In his reading of Levi's essay, Holocaust psychologist Henry Greenspan concludes that relative to the absolute negation imposed by traumatic terror, guilt provides some leeway, for it does not, he asserts, leave one completely without agency and is not in itself completely without meaning. Some future atonement, reconciliation or redemption are at least conceivable, whereas with deadly terror “all-consuming helplessness, unqualified hopelessness—meaning, personal agency and the future itself also die” (1998: 32). What then, I wonder, has paved Chasia’s road to atonement? What, if anything, has been her salvation?

In re-visiting her testimony, it becomes clear that aside from her two children, the work that she undertakes at the Community Centre has provided some form of salve. As she explains:

I didn't do any heroic deeds in my life. I am a simple woman who survived horrific events. I think I survived with dignity, not worse than others... Nowadays I live for my work at the Community Centre. I volunteer as Deputy Director of the Committee for War Veterans and former Partisans. We were asked to help, to create for them a place so that they wouldn't be so lonely...so that they would have a kind of home to go to. And this building, where the Tarbut academy was, that was the place of my youth. So I am very happy to be here, already sixteen years that I volunteer.

I look again to her amber pendant for clues. I notice now, more closely, the thin silver clasp from which it hangs. This heart-shaped filigree of floral design, delicate, intricate, overlapping, yet strong enough to carry the pendant below, seems now to

represent the interweaving of her past and present, the cyclical, circular nature of her destiny—the before and the after entwined. At its centre is a tiny silver disk, a focal point, drawing the attention, announcing a solidity, a pinprick of resilience in an otherwise fragile matrix. It is from this silver clutch that the pendant hangs, this that connects it to a chain, thus to a body, to a life. Chasia's redemption has come through her connection to the lives of others, to the giving of hope and comfort, that even now, at 87, she does not want to end. And I can't help but speculate that her pendant has played a role, however negligible. As a natural resource, amber is thought to possess special curative properties which enable it to absorb pain, to activate the healing process and to ionize toxic elements. Was it these properties that unconsciously drew her towards it all those years ago? Perhaps the holding and the wearing of it, over the decades, has diminished her pain, even slightly.



Figure 57. Chasia's 'visual biographical' exhibit/ Surviving History exhibition, Vilnius, 2009

The pendant's potential for healing, it turns out, is not reserved for Chasia alone. Throughout 2009, it dangled from the centre of her memory box as part of the travelling exhibition which arrived in London in June 2010 following a tour of South Africa. When I met up with Lindsey Fintz, an administrator at the Holocaust Foundation in Cape Town which hosted it, she told me that every morning before going to her desk she would first enter the exhibition hall and check on Chasia's pendant, to make sure "nothing had happened to it overnight." When I asked her why she had designated herself the pendant's de facto guardian, she pointed to two gold bangles on her wrist. These, she explained, were given to her by her mother-in-law, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, who told her: "if you always wear these, even when I am gone, you will never be without me." For Lindsey then, Chasia's amber pendant amplifies the belief that things carry the essence of the person to whom they once belonged and as such have the power to link us to those individuals. The pendant has brought the memory of her beloved mother-in-law closer, reactivating and enlivening her connection to the woman whose loss she still experiences deeply. When Lindsey visited the exhibition in London, she gravitated immediately towards Chasia's memory box, briefly touching the pendant. "What a relief it was," she announced, "when I saw the amber pendant still safe, still hanging there."

Thus Chasia's object, the very substance of which possesses the capacity to heal and to soothe, serves now as a redemptive balm for others. I cannot know its impact on those around the world who may have stood in front of the memory box, gazed upon the pendant and perhaps tentatively stretched out their hands to touch or even hold it. De Waal contends that some objects possess a kind of afterlife such that there is a "breath of hesitancy before touching or not touching, a strange moment wherein a thing can become part of our life of handled things, of the territory of personal story-telling; the sensuous, sinuous intertwining of things with memories" (2010: 17). I can only presume, based on

Lindsey's response, that others too might have found in this amber pendant a personal and redemptive resonance. Those alienated from their past cannot be drawn back towards it by explanation alone; they require evocation as well (Yerushalmi 1982: 100). Such is the potency of objects as vehicles of history.

Chasia's memory box depicts a collective as well as a personal history, highlighting the impossible choice with which she was faced – between leaving her family and saving herself– trapped eternally between ghetto and forest, life and death. At its centre hangs her eternal tear. Katie Dell Kaufman, the Washington-based artist who created this box describes it thus:

An amber teardrop necklace – 'a Lithuanian tear' – defines the center of Chasia's cupboard. The amber is beautiful, yet it also refers to the trees of the forest Chasia lived in as a partisan during the war. Formed by the sap, the blood and 'tears' of the trees, the amber brings us back to the life-changing events that took place between the ghetto and the forest. The two doorways in the cupboard represent her impossible choice - between staying with her son in the ghetto prison or joining her partisan husband in the forest. Then the punishment she endures of losing them both, and being forever caught between the worlds of regret and longing. Between the two doors, tears surround the necklace, obscuring the entrance to the mikveh (in Hebrew, 'a collection of waters'), the sacred purifying bath. For Chasia it's the desire for purification and self forgiveness. The elements of a bird cage - an arched doorway and bars – allude to her caged interior world (Kaufman 2008).

And yet Chasia has no desire to leave this caged world. Several days after our interview, she invites us, at last, to meet her at the Community Centre. We crowd into her tiny office, the walls of which are adorned with the faces of those who fought in the partisans and Red Army. She sits us down with tea and biscuits and then announces directly to me:

So longing and memory have brought you here. Yes? I want to give you a Yiddish song as a gift. This is about a young person who has to leave his home, like your family once had to leave theirs...I remember as a small child my mother singing this lullaby to me – many people, when they get older, they come and search for their hometown, for their roots.. you remember your house, your mother, that you left behind, the love of your mother...

She starts to sing in a mournful, quavering voice. A hush washes over the room. Her eyes are closed, but not this time, in agony, but in a kind of reverie.

Ven men s'iz jung, is groys zayn grunt... Dan yogt er zikh nokh glik.....

Ikh vil aheym.

As I listen tears begin to fall. I look over and notice that Ruta and Fran, my partner, are also weeping silently. When, at last, Chasia is done, no one moves, as if we have entered a force field of memory with her and do not want to leave. Eventually Ruta translates...

When one is young, big is his ground.

Then he chases happiness.

Forgets and loses his home, his nest.

The years do not come back.

And when one becomes old, he starts to remember.

So I would like to see my home again.

Is everything still how it used to be?

Is there a tree and a river, and a roof falling down?

I want home.

Over the next hour, we pore through her photo albums – “Here I am,” she explains, “singing a song and here making a speech, even though they have to force me to do it,” and “here at a funeral just recently.” Image after image we scan, each carefully captioned in elegant lettering, of old men and women, gathered at gravesites and memorials, at the forest in Ponar, their coats and scarves pulled tight against the cold, their bodies bending into the wind. When we finally gather up our things to leave, she grips my hand tightly. “You know,” she says, “time is running now... Let there be many more years ahead for us so that we could continue this work as much as we can. This is our world.”



Figure 58. Chasia at the Jewish Community Centre, Vilnius, 2008.

The Memory Bearer: A Gold Compact and a Violet Brooch



Figure 59. Fania's memory box. Artist: Katie Dell Kaufman/Surviving History exhibition

My introduction to Fania Brantsovsky is contradictory: She is, on the one hand, villified in the Lithuanian press for her alleged participation in partisan attacks on Lithuanian civilians and, on the other, internationally recognized as a heroic representative of Jewish Vilna. At the time of my visit, the 86-year-old is “being sought for questioning by the Prosecutur General with respect to the Kaniukai massacre of January 29th, 1944, a raid carried out by Jewish and Soviet partisans that killed at least two score civilians” (Kafrisson: 2008).



Figure 60. Caricature of Fania as a partisan.
Source: Delphi.lt

When asked by a reporter for the Jerusalem Post to comment on the situation, Fania explained: “My decision to join the partisans was because that group provided a desperate Jew during the Holocaust an opportunity for safety and to defend our honour- so we would not walk to our deaths, and until it is absolutely necessary to leave this country, I will not go. I have fought once and I can fight again” (Singer: 2010). Who then, I wondered, was the woman behind the headlines and the public debate?

As the sole survivor of her family, a former partisan, and more recently a teacher of Yiddish, a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, a tour guide to Vilna's sites of massacre and resistance, she is by any account rightfully described as heroic. But the

accolades heaped upon her (and they are many) perhaps do not fully reflect the complexity of her narrative.



Figure 61. Fania at Vilnius Yiddish Institute, 2008.

The first time I meet Fania she is perched on a small chair, like those used in nursery schools, at the end of a long, low table at the Vilnius Yiddish Intstitute, her head bent into a Yiddish text. In the forty minutes of that initial encounter, she is interrupted by individuals – from the US, Germany, Israel, South Africa – with pressing questions about family archives, Yiddish translations, massacre sites – each of which she answers with enthusiasm. It is exhausting watching her.

Travelling across the city, en route to her flat the following afternoon, Ruta mentions that Fania catches the tram back and forth to the Insitute each day. It occurs to me, on hearing this, that Fania is, in a sense, a living embodiment of De Certeau's *metaphorai* - using as she does a 'metaphor,' in her case, a tram as vehicle of transportation – but also as a carrier, organizer, linker and articulator of stories (1984:

115). I hold in mind, as we traverse the city, the image of a smartly-dressed, petite woman with bright, smiling eyes, accompanied on her journey, morning and night by the ghostly silhouettes of her past, bearing silently a swirling abundance of *metaphorai*, (stories), that no amount of telling can reduce. And yet, as I come to learn, it is through telling and re-telling that Fania has negotiated the catastrophic geography of actions that have made up her life and charted a course from the land of the dead back to the land of the living. Of her work as a guide to Vilna's massacre sites, she says:

The fact that I take people to the Ghetto and to Panariai, I see that as my sacred duty to those who died in Ponar who cannot get up and tell others what took place there and in the Ghetto. For as long as my legs will carry me – as the saying goes- I must go on doing that. There are other guides who take people around. It may well be that they know the figures and the dates better than I do, but that is not my main aim. My story comes straight from the heart.

Through stepping again and again across the storied landscapes – the forts, the pits, the streets, the graveyards – through remembering, in the active sense of the word, those she has lost, rather than leaving them silent, alone, she recovers and reinscribes a sense of self. And it is this avenue to personal agency, as much as the places themselves, that Fania refuses to leave behind. Arendt writes: “a life without speech and without action... is dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (1958: 176). Fania’s life is crammed with both speech and action. Beneath the constant movement, the exhaustive speech, however, perhaps a deeper story can be read.

Man moves to satisfy a need, but in addition to the obvious goal – of getting from one place to another—there is another intangible layer or purpose in which the inner attitude of mind of the mover is reflected. The choreographer Rudolf Laban has

suggested that bodily attitudes during movement are determined by two main action forms: that of gathering and scattering. Gathering, he suggests, is seen as bringing something in while scattering can be observed as pushing something away (1988: 83). If the body itself can be read as text, it is possible in watching Fania – bending her head into a book, casting her gaze rapidly over the text, shifting in her chair, hurrying to open the door in fast, mincing steps, then sitting with those who seek her knowledge – to capture in this state of constant flux a physiological process whereby morsels of the past – people, memories, places—are ingested, gathered, then digested, released and scattered. And this scattering fuels not only Fania herself, but those with whom she comes into contact, such that standing next to her, listening to what she says, imagining all that she cannot say, one feels the weight of what she carries but is also lightened. How, I wondered, has she managed this? To what or to whom has she clung to reach this state? Proust has written of eating a morsel of cake and suddenly becoming overwhelmed by an exquisite pleasure, as if filled with a precious essence, and then remembering the madeleines his aunt Leonie used to give him on Sunday mornings. When of a long distant past, he writes...

...nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection (1981:2).

Objects and places are what Fania holds onto today amid the 'ruins of all the rest.' In poring over some seven days' worth of transcripts and returning to a life-history interview Fania gave in 2005 (Litinskaya), it becomes clear that the tangible, the material

serve, for her, as faithful markers on the life line. In her story, a bag of peas, a small bottle of perfume, a fur collar all take on significance beyond their mere functionality. For her, things are not lifeless, inert; they have voices, they speak, they signify in a manner which palpably reflects the Hasidic teaching that each blade of grass says something, each stone whispers a secret, and each being sings a song.



Figure 62. Fania's biographical objects.

I lay out in front of me a cloth flower brooch, brilliant violet in colour and a gold powder compact. The compact is fashioned in brass, circular in shape with a series of rays etched onto the cover, stretching from a dot like a finger print at the central point outward towards the edges. Worn in the way that brass ages, there are patches of grey on both its top and underside. A hinge at the back is broken such that the lid does not close completely which gives it the impression of a clam shell, or a mouth, perpetually held ajar, as if in the process of taking in breaths, or inviting further exploration. When I lift the cover, I see a smudged mirror and a small gold tray; only later I notice a tiny clip at the side of the tray, which when lifted, reveals a powder puff below. Granules of faint pink residue cling to the soft foam of the puff. Beneath a little net, patches of powder clump together like small islands. It is a deceptively intricate item that I hold in my hand,

with clasps and clutches, layers and hidden spaces, the mirror concealed within the case, the puff beneath the delicately engraved gold tray, the powder buried beneath the puff.

When asked to describe its history, Fania says:

This powder compact ... immediately after the war, we came back to the city. We were used to living in a large group, and we were in a four-room flat and lots of us in it. Misha [her husband] and I were like the 'hosts' and some of the former partisans were like our 'sons'. One of them, he gave me this compact. I didn't use the powder very often, and I used it more as a mirror. I used to wear lipstick. I have a naturally clear complexion. Even in the ghetto where there was nothing to wash with except green soap, like meat in aspic, my skin still shone. People used to joke about it. My whole life I have always washed my face with soap. If I haven't washed my face, I feel dirty. That's why I used to not powder my face. I used the compact as a mirror. Here over the years it's gotten broken, but it's not worn out although I was given it in 1945.

A casual reading of the above and indeed of large tracts of Fania's testimony, during which she makes frequent mention of lipstick, dresses, shoes, coats, collars, perfume, might cast her as someone overly concerned with the material. A deeper reading, however, reveals what is true, not only for her, but for all of us, that materiality, that is, things, humanize us. What makes an object evocative is its ability to become part of our inner world, its capacity to help us bring the world within (Turtle 2007: 307). And the closer our relationship with things, writes social theorist Daniel Miller, the closer our relationship with people (2008: 1). For Arendt, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life. Man, she writes, despite his ever-changing nature, can retrieve his sameness, his identity, by being related to the same chair, the same table. In other words, "against the subjectivity of man stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature" (1958: 137). The material

objects we use are not merely tools we pick up and discard; they constitute the framework of experience that give form to our otherwise shapeless lives and thus contribute to the cultivation of a self, impacting on who we are, who we can become. Fania's gold compact, like her story, is ingrained with a deeply layered identity. With its hidden mirror and secret compartments, it calls to mind the ghetto *malinas*, the basements and attics, false cupboards and sewers into which Jews pressed themselves into invisibility. Peering into its mirror, past the powder smudges and the fingerprints – the accretion of time and dust and grime – it is possible to locate faint traces of the world, long silenced, that Fania carries within. In those traces reside the clues as to why, though broken and unused for decades, sixty-five years on from the moment she was first handed the compact as a gift, she has held onto it and, more importantly, given it to me as her self-representation.



Figure 63. Jocheles' electrical workshop in Vilnius. Source: Brantsovsky

Fania's depictions of pre-war Vilna life centre around a large, four-storey house on Pylimo Street. It was there, in 1928, that her father, Benjamin Jocheles, rented two modest rooms from a 'Madame Trotskaya.' The courtyard, Fania remembers, was a hive of activity populated by a colourful cast of characters: young Schneidman, the boxer, the religious Hasid who sold bowls to sausage makers, the family whose father, a dapper, handsome individual, was an infamous leader of a gang of thieves, the Minz' who had several mischievous daughters and the Yiddish theatre actor: all Jewish, bar the caretaker, Mrs. Sobol. Writing of his time living in the same building, Schneidman recalls: "Before the war Jews were free to live in any part of the city, yet most inhabited an area in which there were few gentiles. Thus, for example, except for the janitor not a single non-Jewish family lived in our apartment house" (1998: 30). He is referring here to Mrs. Sobol who, when the ghetto was instated, would gather up the Jocheles' family photographs and belongings for safekeeping. These, including the photographs displayed here, she returned to Fania after the war.

Her father's electrical shop, with the family name Jocheles emblazoned across an overhead awning, was positioned at the front of the building. Directly behind it was a small bedroom in which her parents slept; a second room was partitioned to create a dining area and the children's quarters. Within this spartan setting, her mother, a canny "economist" worked a medley of minor miracles – whitewashing walls, altering clothes to keep the girls in the latest fashions, embroidering napkins and rugs to cover the furniture, fixing the wiring, however crookedly, even re-hanging the doors when she grew impatient waiting for her husband to get round to the chore – to transform an otherwise drab space into a comfortable family home.



Figure 64. Benjamin Jocheles with his students. Source: Brantsovsky

To keep the family's finances afloat, Benjamin Jocheles offered night classes at the technical college ORT. In return for his services he was invariably paid just a small portion of his salary with the remainder recorded in a ledger as credit. When this amount accumulated to a substantial sum, ORT representatives would pay him a visit, and remunerate him with 50 percent of the outstanding balance. "For me, as a child," Fania recalls, "that was a special occasion. One time, both mother and father bought themselves winter coats. I even remember what my father's looked like. It had a fur collar. That I remember."

Throughout, Fania's recollections portray a family in which the example of love, friendship, learning and a generous attitude toward others was something that was "in our blood." Birthdays were celebrated no matter how straitened the circumstances. Her mother, Rohl always made a point of keeping something aside for the Jewish poor. Her father earmarked a small percentage of his monthly salary for literature. "We would read a lot," Fania says, "books and Yiddish newspapers and we often went for walks together

and discussed what we had read.” Her love of learning, inculcated at her father's knee, was reinforced at the Yiddish Gymnasium where Fania studied five languages as well as history, physics, maths and biology. But it was the practical instruction in handicraft, glass and woodwork, knitting and sewing, “making things with your own hands” that would prove most valuable to her when she entered the ghetto. These skills, she says, saved her life.

Although she attended a Yiddish school and lived almost exclusively among Jews, Fania's adherence to Jewish tradition was patchy. Her parents, as secular Bundists, prioritized the humanitarian rather than the religious principles of the faith, refusing to follow the laws of *Kashruth* and, in what could be considered the greatest rebuff of Jewish life, actually ate ham whenever they could afford it. Nonetheless her mother made valiant attempts at maintaining a 'Jewish atmosphere' in the home, eating *matza* (unleavened bread) on Passover and, most importantly, fasting on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Meanwhile her father viewed this holiest of High Holidays as an opportunity for a rare day off and repaired to the local missionary's cafe for his supper. Writing of his own parents' attitudes towards religious practice, Shneidman explains that it was “out of respect for the passing generation that my parents did their best to keep their Jewish heritage alive” (1998: 25).



Figure 65. Fania's paternal grandparents. Source: Brantsovsky

For Fania also, it was her paternal grandparents, Velvl and Rohe-Gisia Jocheles who brought Judaism to life. On Saturdays she would accompany them on the walk home from synagogue, her grandfather in the long back coat and special *kippah* (head covering) he reserved for *Shabbos*, her grandmother donning a wig, as was the custom. Back at their house, the family would sit in the dark until after sundown when Shabbos had ended and they could once again turn on the lights. This proved a source of endless frustration for Fania's father who, she remembers, insisted throughout the evening: 'Fania, light the lamps,' to which his father would retort: 'How Godless you are, it's too early!'

Fania's pre-war narrative is suffused with countless such anecdotes in which the comfort, humour and safety of family life are foregrounded, a sense of security palpably present in a photo taken on an ordinary summer's afternoon in 1933 which displays Fania, her sister, her parents, the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—a regular Jewish family enjoying the last of the day's warmth. Fania is seated to the left of the photograph, her sister Rivke across from her. Ten years on, only Fania and one aunt (standing behind her in the back row) would still be alive.



Figure 66. Jocheles Family on the lawn. Source: Brantsovsky

Nothing in their world on that summer's day could have prepared them for what was to come. On 21st June, 1941, a similar evening several years later, Fania, by then a schoolteacher, and her sister Rivke, 14 at the time, were chatting on Pylimo Street with some friends. A group of German soliders drove up. An officer approached and demanded that they sing a song. When nobody moved, he pointed a gun in their direction, ready to shoot. Slowly, Rivke began to sing. He laughed and walked away. That moment, says Fania, “was the beginning and the end, all at once.”

Thereafter, the situation deteriorated drastically. Jews were prohibited from walking on the pavements, shopping in markets and using public transportation. Men were forced to shave their beards and sometimes made to dance and ridiculed in the middle of the street. Each day brought a new barrage of orders, with which they could barely keep up: one day Jews had to wear a big white quadrate with a yellow circle and the letter ‘J’ inside it on their chests, then on another day, it was white armbands with a yellow star, then just a yellow star. Anyone caught without the proper identification was immediately shot.

On the morning of 6th September 1941, a German officer arrived at the Jocheles residence and ordered them to pack “only what you can carry.” They were marched to a building across the street. “Then,” Fania recalls, “the gate was closed and we just sat there...” A few days later, they were transferred to a two-room flat on Srashun 7, which they shared with 18 others. Her parents slept on a tiny bed while Fania, her sister and another family occupied the floor. They ate *vobla* (Caspian roach), a dry salt fish and millet, in a variety of preparations – soup, gruel, porridge – and these, Fania says, “were the good times.” One afternoon shortly thereafter, a group of young men who worked in the peat bogs were despatched instead to “the sauna,” locked inside a shed and burnt alive. On Yom Kippur, 21st September 1941, all those who were praying in the

synagogue in the 'small ghetto,' including her grandparents, were forced out into the yard, held overnight and transported to Ponar.

Id Nr	Pavardė, vardas	Gimimo data	Amatas	Atsim.
84	Katatčinski Broche	1907	šachų polo	Strašuno g. 7-8
85	Katatčinski Šeina	1927	status	Strašuno g. 7-8
86	Katatčinski Hirš	1921	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
87	Katatčinski Sora	1911	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
88	Karpilovska Liza	1920	siesorius	Strašuno g. 7-8
89	Piktušinski Aron	1920	elektromonter.	Strašuno g. 7-8
90	Jocheles Benjamin	1898	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
91	Jocheles Rachela	1901	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
92	Jocheles Fania	1926	-	Strašuno g. 7-8
93	Jocheles Ryva	1927	iškabų darb.	Strašuno g. 7-8
94	Grodzenčik Samuel	1886	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
95	Grodzenčik Sara	1926	-	Strašuno g. 7-8
96	Grodzenčik Nachama	1901	siuvėjas	Strašuno g. 7-8
97	Vainerovič Joel	1910	-	Strašuno g. 7-8
98	Vainerovič Leja	1900	-	Strašuno g. 7-8
99	Vainerovič Šolom	1932	-	Strašuno g. 7-8
	Vainerovič Benjamin	1934	siuvėja	Strašuno g. 7-8
		1908		

Figure 67. List of Vilna Ghetto workers - Jocheles family names.

Benjamin Jocheles soon realized that the best way to keep the family safe was to register them; each man or woman who worked could register themselves, their spouse and two dependants. Only later would Fania discover that her father had listed her birth date as 1926 rather than 1922, thereby rescuing her from the forced labour that she says: “I would not have survived.” Although technically a dependant and thus exempt from working, Fania, in a display of the kind of enterprise and ingenuity that would ultimately save her, immediately rounded up a group of young seamstresses to form a sewing workshop.

It is at this juncture in her story that materiality begins to take precedence. Through yard upon yard of straw rope, out of which shoes for German soldiers were

fashioned, through the sharp *manelia* (fine grass) needles plaited for silk slippers destined for officer's wives, through the bundles of wool knitted endlessly for sweaters and women's cardigans, we enter the reality of ghetto life. The Hasidic concept of *Tikkun Olam* is one in which we are called upon to mend, to repair and make right the world, as if patching and darning it back into harmony. And I have an image of Fania, her fingers cut, bloodied and bandaged, working ceaselessly through the night to mend and make right her little stretch of the world. As her mother was unwell, her sister too young, she toiled overtime to fulfil their quotas as well as her own. Sometimes neighbours would bring her old fingerless mittens which she would unravel, dye and transform into an article of clothing which could then be sold for a few pennies. In this manner she fashioned a dress for a friend and, from a bundle of silk boucle, the colour of which she still recalls vividly, lilac or lilas-rouge, a silk blouse for the bride of the head of the ghetto police. A roll of yarn, a small bundle of silk, a ball of wool, and the ability to transform them into items of utility, of beauty, could save a life.

In researching Ona Simaite, the gentile ghetto librarian who, at risk to her own life, smuggled food and even children in and out of the ghetto, her biographer Julija Sukys, remarks on the "dailyness" with which her story is infused (2012: 56). And there is something of that dailyness in Fania's tale: the focus on the ordinary, on the present, on the challenges of negotiating the everyday. "Laundry," Fania says, "That was a huge burden; Momma was sick, Rivke with a broken leg, so I had to do it all, on top of everything else." Cleaning toilets, she exclaims proudly, "I became a specialist in that task." In Simaite's story, Sukys argues, "we have to account for the simultaneous largeness and smallness of her time on this earth...to reconcile her thoughts on anarchy and totalitarianism with poetic passages about her love for cats; cubism with doll-making, literature with laundry" (57). The same might be said of Fania.

The severity of ghetto life and the small rays of hope with which Fania and her family countered it are circumscribed in the material. They lived in constant hunger. They were assigned bread cards with which they could retrieve “grey bread with sawdust.” From cabbage, Fania’s mother made something she jokingly called herrring. From peas she fashioned liver paste and from frozen potatoes she produced a glorious sweet tzimes. When Rivke broke her leg, they had to hide the offending limb under a roll of torn fabric for fear she would be found out, classified as disabled and taken from them.

Yet, for all the agonized memories, Fania also recalls more hopeful ones, like the birthday when her friend smuggled in two dandelions as a gift for her. “She took a tremendous risk bringing these flowers past the guards,” Fania explains, “but these two branches embodied a message of hope from outside the ghetto.” Fania also makes mention of a little bottle of perfume given to her by her friend, Honke, one of the few possessions she carried with her when she fled the ghetto, five minutes before the guards arrived to liquidate it on the 23rd September 1943, leaving her family behind. It was a decision made against a backdrop of escalating fear. Yitskhok Rudashevski describes those weeks leading up to liquidation as follows:

The situation is an oppressive one. We now know all the horrible details.. five thousand Jews were taken to Ponar where they were shot to death. Our mood like the sky is heavily overcast...Suddenly a clap of thunder, a flash of lightning and it begins to rain. The restless sad people are whipped out of the few little streets. The rain lashes as though it wished to flush everything out of the world. We have a feeling of oppression and anguish...We are on guard... (2002: 225)

On July 10th, 1943, Kruk offers a similar view under the heading ' *The Air Grows Thicker*':

It looks as if we are coming to the end. The air grows thicker, like a mockery - everything around becomes narrower and narrower.. the air grows thicker....From ear to ear...people are talking about a supposed segregation between men, women and children... the air grows thicker... A question mark hangs over the ghetto...the air grows thicker (587).

Amidst this oppressive atmosphere, Fania had been approached by members of an underground partisan movement which convened secretly in the basement of the Strashun Library, a few doors from her lodgings. At her first meeting, she was introduced to a motley group of Bundists, Communists, Zionists, Revisionists, whose common goal, whatever the discrepancies in their ideological positions, was “to fight the Fascists.” These individuals, Fania explains, “were not thinking about which party they belonged to. Each of us in our heart believed in something, but it was important, that we were able, after shedding everything that divided us, to look for what united us.” Members were separated into units, each of which consisted of a commander and five comrades who knew only those in their immediate group. Fania’s was named *Lisa’s Calling* in honour of the slain partisan Lisa Roft. Describing the partisan mood, fellow comrade, Berl Weinreb, recorded in his unpublished memoir, *Shared Tragedies*:

As members of FPO, an underground group in the Vilna Ghetto, we escaped on September 12, 1943. Our aim was to reach the territories in White Russia where the Partisans were concentrated, to join them and to fight against the Nazi murderers. There were twenty-five fighters in our group, most of us carried guns and grenades. We knew that although we were still in danger we were no longer afraid of death as we had been in the Ghetto. At least now we would have a chance to defend ourselves and possibly kill Nazis... after seven nights of walking, hiding during the day in swamps, forests or lonely farms, we reached our destination... (RG116/15/4.8: YIVO) .

Fania's moment of escape would arrive eleven days later. On 23rd September, in response to the recent closure of the ghetto gates, the sudden embargo on outside work, and the subsequent arrival of large quantities of clothes – torn, blood-stained and shot through– for repairs as if to distract ghetto residents from uprising, Fania's group leaders decided to send out girls, in units of two, to make contact with partisan fighters in the forest. Fania and her partner, Dova Develtov, were called to the library and handed a list of village names to memorize that would lead them out of Vilna and into the woods. Then they were sent home to wait for a signal. When asked what those last moments were like, Fania says: "I said goodbye to my family. My mother and sister were crying. I stayed strong. It never occurred to me that this could be the last time I saw them." A short while later, Dova appeared to tell Fania that a side gate had been opened for Grigorii Yarshunsky, a leader of the Judenrat (Jewish governing body in the Ghetto) and his wife who were going into hiding, and that if they hurried, they could pass through at the same time. Fania put on a winter jacket that had "once been part of a long coat, but of course had no fur trimmings because the Germans had taken all the fur," even though it was still summer. Her mother handed her a small bag, "black with a red zip" into which she placed the little bottle of perfume bequeathed by Honke and her first lipstick, a present from her mother. Finally, just before departing, her mother handed her a bag of boiled peas.

As it turned out, Fania and Dova were the only ones to escape with Yarshunsky and his wife that day. Outside the gate, Yarshunsky turned left; they turned right. From their vantage point just yards away, they caught sight of armed policemen surrounding the ghetto, standing a distance of ten metres apart. A convoy of lorries drew up, manned by soldiers in dark-green uniforms. Fania knew that "something terrible was about to happen." As Fania and Dova inched away, German and Ukranian forces entered. Residents were assembled in the courtyard and instructed to line up by the ghetto gates in

an orderly fashion, believing that they were being sent to labor camps. Instead, the males were steered in one direction, the women and children in another, patients were hauled from their hospital beds, infants from the children's home, explosives were set off to ferret out those in hiding, all loaded onto lorries and driven away (Arad 1982: 429-430).

Saved from this fate by a matter of minutes, Fania and Dova headed towards the forest, their only guide an arbitrary list of names etched onto their memories. After several days, the bag of peas long finished, they met a local farmer who led them to his dilapidated hut and fed them bread and milk. "There were swamps ahead," Fania recalls, "and he made us sticks for walking and showed us the way out of the swamp and then he left. When we got out into clear land, we saw a patch of strawberries, can you imagine, what a sight to see, at that time of year, like a miracle, so we started singing joyful Soviet songs. Someone halted us. 'Who goes there?'"

"And instead of saying the password, we started laughing and crying... it was a partisan patrol that we had bumped into." As Fania relives this journey, I have an image of her, trekking through uncertain terrain, straining under the weight of her winter coat, clutching in her arms a little black and red bag, inside of which lay the treasured bottle of perfume, the half-used lipstick: these two relics, the vestiges of what would soon become her former life, hastily pulled together before departure. In describing the circumstances of exiled Palestinians, Edward Said wrote:

These intimate mementos of a past irrevocably lost circulate among us like the genealogies and fables of a wandering singer of tales. Photographs, dresses, objects severed from their original locale [...] we carry them about, hang them on every set of new walls we shelter in, reflect lovingly on them. Then we do not notice the bitterness but it continues to grow nonetheless. Nor do we acknowledge the frozen immobility of our attitudes. In the end the past owns us (1986:14)

There is little in the Fania of today that suggests a frozenness of spirit or indeed a bitterness, yet it is true that she, like the exiled, rootless men and women Said refers to, is owned by her past. The items she lugged along on that fateful trek out of the ghetto and into the forest constituted a means to carry little pieces of that past with her.

Psychotherapist D.W. Winnicott coined the phrase 'transitional object' as a designation for any material object to which an infant attributes a special value, usually a blanket or soft toy, and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with the mother to one with the outside world, such that the object becomes a holding or soothing mediator between the child's sense of self and the external world (2005: 2). Winnicott believed that throughout life we continue to search for objects that we can experience in the intermediate space between self and the surround. Viewed in this light, Fania's bag of treasures takes on dimensions of greater significance. Bereft of mother, father, sister, community and peers, perhaps a bottle of perfume, a worn coat, a lipstick could soothe and remind. Through them she kept the essence, the smell, the sense of her family all around her, just as a baby might cling to his special blanket long after his mother has left the room.

Things extend our consciousness by allowing us to bring the world within, but they also serve to extend the self outward. In Fania's story, we witness how the bonds of community, among the partisans, were strengthened and expressed through the giving and sharing of material objects. The social theorist Marcel Mauss has suggested that a gift received can never be considered inactive, for even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still retains something of him. Everything, he says, is there for passing to and from as if the world was a constant exchange of spiritual matter, including things and men (1950: 48). This transactional spirit was evident in the case of Fania's boots.

She arrived in the forest wearing a pair of “shabby, high-heeled sandals.” On noticing the inappropriateness of her footwear during her first assignment – sawing down telegraph wires to break communication between German garrisons – Borovskaya, the unit commissar, offered her a pair of boots that had once belonged to her murdered son. “This was how close our friendships were,” Fania explains. It was again through footwear, in this instance a pair of soft leather boots to replace the ill-fitting ones bequeathed to her by Boroskaya, that she first interacted with unit leader, Mikhail Brantsovsky, who would eventually become her husband. They had in common, she says now: “a happy cloudless childhood interrupted by war and the ghetto. We felt close to one another at once... we were both worried about what happened to our dear ones, kind of guessing their tragic end...and that made my attachment to Mikhail all the stronger.”

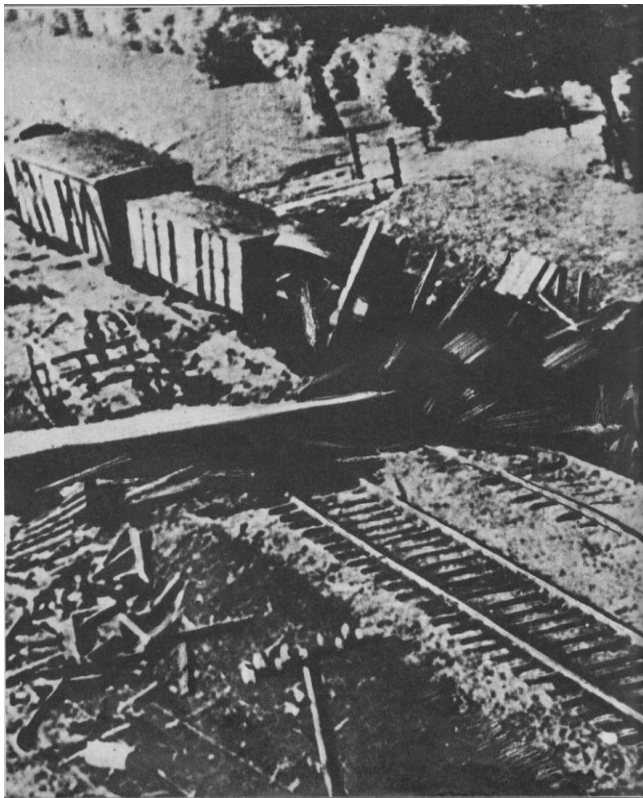


Figure 68. The aftermath of partisan activity in Vilna.

Source: *Lieutuvos Partizanai*, 1967

Under Mikhail's tutelage, Fania set off to blast trains, blow up bridges and place explosives in enemy equipment. Michael Bart, whose parents also served in the partisan units in the Rudnicki forest, describes his mother's attitude towards fighting and towards her fort roommate, Fania Jocheles:

To be a fighter took a certain kind of personality and Zenia had always been content to support the fighters by doing her job well back at camp. But she greatly admired the women partisans, including Fania Jocheles who slept just across from her in their bunker. Fania went out on several missions with her husband and Zenia had hoped there might be some way she herself could play a more significant role beyond the boundaries of the camp (2008: 213).



Figure 69. Fania, Misha and her unit.

Figure 70. Fania and her partisan friends after liberation.

Source: Staras, 1967.

It is hard to imagine that the diminutive, elderly woman I meet could have ever perpetrated injury upon another and during our interviews she refers only obliquely to 'missions,' 'escapades' but not to direct killing. It is possible that the recent furore over her alleged involvement in the battle of Kanuiga (during which she insists she was suffering severe 'stomatitis' and was therefore unable to participate) dissuades her from speaking more openly. However in the 2005 interview, which I later discover, she is far more candid, proclaiming: "I became a member of a group. I was given a rifle and then an automatic gun. I dragged it with me and took part in military missions... We shot and killed them... Yes, I did. I killed them and did so with ease. I knew that my dear ones were dead and I took my revenge for them and for thousands of others with each and every shot" (Litinskaya 2005). The transition from loving sister, daughter, granddaughter, Jewish pre-school teacher to radicalized partisan capable of taking another's life without remorse is understandable in the context of a life story in which episode after episode ends with death—the residents of her courtyard -murdered, her teacher, Malka Heimson - perished in the ghetto in 1942, her grandparents Velvl and Rohe-Gisia-transported to Ponar and murdered, her mother - fate unknown, her father - captured, her sister- sent to a death camp, whereabouts unknown, her mother's family from Kaunas, aunts, uncles, grandparents -all murdered in the Kovno ghetto. There is no end to the list of her deceased. Of such tragedy is born the capacity to shoot and kill with ease.

In July 1944, Fania and her comrades learned that Vilna had been liberated by the Russians and prepared to march home. She remembers arriving in the city and seeing corpses lined up, row after row – German soldiers and Russian ones – all with bare feet as the locals had removed their shoes. She and her group rented a 'mansion' on Pylimo, very close to where she had once lived with her own family. "We were," says Fania,

“intoxicated by the victory, our youth and by love. But that, of course, was not the whole story.”

I was happy and sad walking the familiar streets. There were hardly any Jews left in Vilnius and when I saw older Jews, or they looked old to me considering how young I was, I felt like kneeling before them to kiss their hands. I approached them to talk to them and find out where they had been during the war.

By interrogating “anyone and everyone,” Fania eventually learned that her father had been interned in Klooga Lager, Estonia. From an official document she later discovered that Jocheles Benaimen – prisoner number 483, year of birth 1898, profession 'elektriker' – was listed as alive in the fall of 1944. A family friend, who had also been at Klooga, later confirmed that he had perished just prior to liberation. Several young girls who had been arrested with her mother sought Fania out after the war and relayed how women over the age of 35 in their group had been sent out to sea on a barge and drowned. Fania’s sister had begged to be taken away with her mama, but a German officer had pushed her aside. Instead Rivke was transferred to a weaving factory in Riga; one of the girls who had worked alongside her told Fania that Rivele used to make up little poems as she worked, singing to herself: “I’m standing by a sewing machine, weaving belts to hang Fascists on...” The last sighting of Rivke placed her at Stutthoff.

This double-edged disposition – of salvation coupled with anguish – was captured succinctly by Berl Weinreb in a journal entry from June 1944:

We have been liberated now; our lives are no longer in danger. We are realising that very few of us survived. Most of the Partisans were sent home. Everybody was 'happy' they were going home. We Jews know there is no place for us to go, no home, no family, no friends. What will we do? Will we remain at the graves in Vilna? Only time will tell... (RG116/15/4.8:YIVO)

Eesti Riigiarhiiv R-170/1-2
(feldpostkaardid 10,5x7,5 cm)

KLOOGA LAAGER.

1944.a juudi vangide nimekiri

(A)	1. Abel Hinde	1925	Wilna	Schneiderin	0365
	2. Abel Wulf	1904	Wilna	gerber	150
	3. Abelervitsch Yeischo	1921	Ponewesch	gläser	292
	4. Abelowitsch Hinda	1922	Widse	Schneiderin	01741
	5. Abelowitsch Isakel	1893	Wilna	arbeiter	3832
	6. Abir Jotz	1922	Kaunen	Schneiderin	02524
	7. Abramowitsch Braina	1918	Jutburg	Schneiderin	0799
	8. Abramowitsch Dawid	1924	Wilna	automobilm.	2665
	9. Abramowitsch Eita	1905	Wilna	wankenschw.	038
	10. Abramowitsch Jakob	1927	Wilna	arbeiter	2672
	11. Abramowitsch Hinda	1906	Wilna	steckerin	0274
	12. Abramowitsch Judita	1916	Wilna	Schneiderin	013
	13. Abramowitsch Minna	1900	Wilna	wäscherin	0387
	14. Abramowitsch Moesch	1900	Wilna	gläser	718
	15. Abramowitsch Mordech	1894	Wilna	schuhmacher	2666
	16. Abramowitsch Necha	1926	Wilna	Schneiderin	026
	17. Abramowitsch Rosa	1907	Wilna	plätterin	035
	18. Abramowitsch Sara	1928	Wilna	hilfschneiderin	0638
	19. Abramowitsch Schimon	1904	Wilna	schneider	408
	20. Abramowitsch Wulf	1908	Wilna	schneider	409
	21. Abtamsohn Alfer	1924	Knewa	tischlergeh.	5578
	22. Achs Dina	1908	Kaunen	Schneiderin	02676
	23. Adelsohn Motel	1904	Wilna	feiermännchen	734
	24. Adler David	1915	Kaunen	tischler	5484
	25. Adler Efraim	1889	Kaunen	tischler	5485
	26. Adler Ela	1913	Kaunen	Schneiderin	0286
	27. Adler Hirsch	1924	Kaunen	tischler	5483
	28. Adunski Raya	1915	Wilna	wäscherin	039
	29. Aisin Chana	1914	Wilna	Schneiderin	0539
	30. Akabas Dora	1918	Wilna	Schneiderin	0547
	31. Akoton Aron	1908	Wilkowische	buchhalter	5261
	32. Akoton Malka	1911	Kaunen	kochin	01936
	33. Albersstadt Rosa	1905	Kaunen	Schneiderin	02526
	34. Alper Sonia	1911	Wilna	wäscherin	0230
	776. Jedwab Jankel	1920	Wilna		
	777. Jedwab Leiser	1927	---		
	778. Jedwab Schmuel	1926	---		
	779. Jemlow Scheina	1900	---	Schneiderin	0423
	780. Jemshanski Boris	1905	---	Tischler	143
	781. Jeruchimowitsch Leiser	1906	---	Schneider	397
	782. Jerusalemski Felix	1903	---	Handschuhmach.	160
	783. Jerusalemski Salomon	1910	---	---	161
	784. Jeserski Salomon	1884	---	Schuhmacher	528
	785. Jocheles Benjamin	1898	---	Elektriker	423
	786. Jocheles Doba	1923	---	Schneiderin	0190
	787. Jochelewitsch Abram	1919	---	Schlosser	657
	788. Jochelewitsch Judita	1915	dingenberg	Schuhmacherin	2890
	789. Jochelesohn Jenta	1900	Wilna	Schneiderin	0316
	790. Jochelesohn Salomith	1928	---	Elektriker	0317
	791. Joffe Abram	1918	---	Klempner	146
	792. Joffe Chasia	1899	---	Flechterin	058
	793. Joffe Ela	1919	Kaunen	Schneiderin	02661
	794. Joffe Moson	1898	Wilna	Drucker	1079
	795. Joffe Riwa	1912	Kaunen	Schneiderin	0671
	796. Joffe Rocha	1901	---	---	02887
	797. Joffe Wulf	1907	Wilna	Malter	108
	798. Jotis Rosa	1908	Kaunen	Schneiderin	02818
	799. Jotlew Mases	1913	Dombin	Tischler	280
	800. Joselewitsch Gita	1923	Kaunen	Elektriker	02782
	801. Jospe Aron	1911	Wilna	Tischler	4579
	802. Jospe Israel	1922	---	Schneider	322
	803. Julelewitsch Sonia	1915	---	Wäscherin	0207
	804. Juckowski Jodel	1907	Srednik	Limmermann	5331
	805. Juter Dweria	1925	Kaunen	Stickerin	02644
	806. Juter Riwa	1924	---	Arbeiterin	02645
	807. Jutkowski Basia	1915	---	Stickerin	02595
(K)	808. Kaplan Brocha	1925	Wilna	Steckerin	0120
	809. Kaplan Dweria	1905	---	Schneiderin	0295
	810. Kaplan Ester	1927	Kaunen	Wäscherin	02665
	811. Kaplan Hirsch	1895	Wilna	Holzschnitzer	118
	812. Kaplan Jentz	1900	---	Schneider	475
	813. Kaplan Jodel	1928	Holschany	Schlosser	4439
	814. Kaplan Leiba	1924	Wilna	Schuhmacher	4439
	815. Kaplan Meti	1900	Kaunen	Wäscherin	02662
	816. Kaplan Minna	1899	---	Schneiderin	02664

Figure 71. Prisoner list from Klooga Concentration Camp with Benjamin Jocheles' name. Source: Brantsovsky

What will we do? The predicament of the returning partisan was amplified for me with heart-breaking clarity on one of our last days in Vilnius when Fania invited us to accompany her to the partisan fort. A few kilometres outside the city, we entered the Rudnicki forest, driving along a dirt track until we arrived at a small clearing. Fania alighted and we followed her under a light drizzle as she picked her way through broken branches, stopping and bending to point out a nut here, a berry or a flower there, distinguishing between edible and poisonous. Talking all the way, she led us to the mouth of a cave-like structure, explaining how this one had been the hospital, another a few yards away was where they had eaten and slept, and yet another further on was where the commissary had been housed. In all over 100 partisans had survived in this forest for almost two years.

Eventually Fania stopped in front of the largest sinking fort and stood immobile, silent for a long while. It was the first time in all of our interactions that I had seen her completely still. I watched from a distance, not wanting to intrude, remembering the story she had relayed the previous evening about those first days back in Vilnius waiting for news:

People were starting to come back from the camps and a woman arrived who said that my sister had survived. I used to run to the station every day to meet the trains bringing people back. I remember I had received a ration card for a three-quarter length sheepskin coat. I didn't go and cash it in for myself, because I wanted to save it for my little sister. When I met the woman again a month later, I asked her whether Revele had come back yet and the woman asked, 'but who told you she was still alive?' I understood that the woman had suffered many hardships, but it was very painful for me.

Here again was the power of the transitional object. When the writer Joan Didion's husband died suddenly, she found herself unable to throw away his shoes because she was convinced that he may one day need them. This, explains theorist Sherry Turkle is the magical thinking that is associated with the illness of mourning. Freud believed that the true object, the lost husband, or in Fania's case the sister, the mother, the father, comes eventually to have a full internal representation through which the formal process of mourning is completed and only at that point can the shoes, or in the case of Fania, the coupon, be relinquished. In the meantime they serve a transitional role (Turkle 2007: 318).



Figure 72. Fania at the partisan forts, 2008.

There was something so tentative, so questioning in Fania's movements as she approached that sinking fort, as if she was searching for something or waiting for someone. And as she stood completely still at the mouth of the bunker, in *her* three-quarter length winter coat, I had the distinct impression that, in her mind's eye, she had returned to the platform at the station, waiting with the coupon eagerly clutched in her hand for her sister Revele to come into view.

Through the course of this research, I have come to view the interview exchange as a series of layered movements in the sense Bratslav invokes when he describes the storytelling process as one in which: "The word moves a bit of air and thus the next, until it reaches the one who receives it and he receives his soul therein, and therein is awakened" (in Myerhoff 2007: 2), the interview itself representing a cylinder or vat of experience – much like the metaphor of the pits at Ponar as containers- through which I, as interviewer, drill down. As Fania had invoked the memory of Rivke and the coupon the previous evening, the air in the room seemed suddenly to stand still. And when, at last, she had finished speaking, I asked: if you could see your family again, what would you say to them? She glanced up, almost stricken at the question. I was not asking for a

colourful story, for details of an attack or an escape, the telling of which she had, over the years, perfected but for something far more personal. She had never been asked and thus had never answered, this question before. Finally, after a long silence, she told me:

There's a program on Soviet television called 'Wait for Me,'... there are cases on that program of people who have met up after many years have elapsed, people who've been separated since 1937... sometimes I sit and watch and take a very keen interest because it's about people finding each other. I watch and dream—how wonderful it would be if I could find someone. If other people find each other... then perhaps I might one day, even though I am 100% sure that nothing like that could ever happen... so there is no hope left but you can still dream. In my heart I still celebrate my family's birthdays, Father's on September 25th, Mama's on March 6th and my sister's on May 13th. I remember each one of them on their birthday every year as if they were still with me. And if I could speak to them now, I would tell them that I tried to avenge their deaths, that I love them. And that I have thought about them all the time. Even though there is no hope now, for a long time I hoped and I believed...

Her voice trailed off.

Through all the quirky anecdotes of pre-war Vilna life, the searching out for moments of humour, of humanity in the ghetto, the adventures and partisan escapades, through our multiple meetings, over many hours, I had not breached the wall of composure from behind which Fania confronts her past. But here it was: the sum of her sorrows—in the slight tightness of her lips, the flicker of agony behind her bright, dancing eyes. I realised suddenly that it had been there all along; behind the brisk movements and the rapid-fire speech, the laughter and the upbeat demeanour lay a melancholy that had no words.

Through the years that followed liberation, Fania held on to that coupon and to a hope and a belief in a miracle that, deep down, she knew would never come to pass. Once settled in Vilnius, she and Misha found employment under the Soviet regime, Fania as a

statistical analyst and her husband as a Chief of State Planning for Lithuania. As avowed, “conscientious” members of the Communist Party, they were given an apartment where they raised their two daughters to be “hardworking and modest people just as we had been raised” although they never, Fania asserts, “took advantage of our position... never for example, owned a car or a *dacha*.” Their political convictions wavered during the Doctor's Plot of 1953, when a group of Jewish doctors charged with plotting against Stalin were executed, a new wave of anti-Semitic propaganda was unleashed and Jews were dismissed from their jobs and deported to the Gulags. This period, Fania recalls as “the terrible years,” but “not nearly as terrible as what we had already been through.” And no matter how many of their friends left for Israel, America, South Africa, no matter how difficult things became, they “never once considered emigrating.” “We had our life here,” Fania says, “we didn't observe Jewish traditions, but we could speak Yiddish amongst ourselves. I don't regret that my husband and I lived our life in Lithuania, although in time we had a better understanding of the hypocrisy of the Soviet power, but for many years we were its true servants.”

That life unravelled abruptly in 1985 when, during a routine medical exam, it was discovered that Misha had cancer. He was admitted to a hospital for “high government officials” believing that “he was going to be alright,” but never returned home again. Seven months later, he passed away. The funeral was held at the military cemetery in Vilnius with all “our combat friends, our colleagues from all over the country who came to make speeches by his casket. That day I lost my beloved husband, my best friend.”

Fania's second biographical object reveals both the strength and the tenderness of their love. A cloth violet flower brooch, given to her by Misha after one of his trips abroad (he brought one back for her every time he travelled), its soft, fragile petals are affixed to a rigid stem: the delicate and the hardy, the transitory and the enduring, side by

side. Just as things retain the pulse of their makers, gifts retain something of their givers and serve as artefacts of shared love, even when mortality has cast them loose from maker, owner, bestower. The afternoon we visited Fania at her home, after she had decided on the gold powder compact as *her* biographical object, she continued to search and search... for something, I believe, that represented not just her life alone, but her life with Misha. Eventually, she pulled a selection of brooches from a drawer, carefully laid them out on a table, and flitted her hand from one to the other like a butterfly, resting fleetingly on a flower, as if, for a instant, scooping up the lingering presence of her late husband.



Figure 73. Fania's treasured brooch collection.

People use objects to cope with absence and perhaps never really outgrow the need to incarnate in objects those whom they love (Auslander 2005: 1017). These fashion accessories, which Fania still wears, twenty-five years after Misha's passing, keep him with her. It is this love alongside “work and my children” that lie at the heart of her survival. The gold powder compact, the coupon, the brooches, all of these transitional objects have accompanied her on the path back from forest to city, from death to life. Jackson contends that lives, like rivers, periodically flood and run dry: rapid alternate

with calm stretches, shallows with depths and there are places where eddies, counter-currents, undertows, cross currents, backwaters and dark reaches make navigation unpredictable (in Bar-On 2006: 27). Fania's journey surely represents one such navigational conundrum, thrust as she was from a life of relative comfort in pre-war Vilna to the insecurity of the ghetto, forcibly migrated into a space of contingency, strangeness and danger in the forest, only to claw her way back to a semblance of familiarity in a city of ruins. Her powder compact contains all the traces of this harrowing journey. In it lies the act of return to civilized living, the attempt at normalcy embarked upon by her and her comrades. But it also represents a very personal turning point, from foraging like a scavenger in the forest, unable to even wash her face, to becoming again a woman, feminine, sensual, alive. This is why she kept it all these years, she tells me, to remind herself, of where she has been and how she came back. This talisman of survival, she has now bequeathed to me. The responsibility for the present of an object is also a duty to its past – an obligation to its onward transmission. That obligation is now mine.

The Memory Bearer: A Yarmulke, A Medal And A Rusty Key



Figure 74. Berl Glazer at Seskine cemetery, 2008.

Although it might be suggested that sensory experience and perception have always been central to the ethnographic encounter, social scientist Sarah Pink argues for a more explicit sensory ethnography whereby through paying attention to the senses in the gathering and representation of knowledge, the researcher achieves deeper, richer levels of understanding, inaccessible through observation or interview methods alone (2009: 8). While I remained aware, in each interview, that it is on the pulses that the most profound types of knowledge (Turner 1986: 33) can be grasped, Pink's notion of researcher as sensory apprentice took on a particularly acute significance in the case of Berl Glazer because he is blind.

In Pink's view, the interview itself is not so much the gathering of data that the researcher will take away to analyse but rather a process of bringing together words, textures, sounds, and images which combine to create an experience of knowing. By sitting in a person's living room, she argues, drinking from their mugs, looking at the images that adorn their walls, one begins to occupy the world as they do (86). The interview exchange, as such, creates what she terms a place-event, engendering an opportunity to reflect, define and communicate about experiences in a more heightened, focused manner than occurs through everyday life encounters. As a result, new ways of knowing are produced through which researchers not only come to understand the experiences of others, but also to arrive at enhanced awareness about their own lives (87). Within moments of sitting at the table in Berl's tiny apartment, I was struck by the keen manner in which the specifics of his circumstances resonated with me.



Figure 75. Berl at home, 2008.

As a child I spent an inordinate amount of time in the company of my maternal grandfather Isaac Geller. Watching Berl shuffle around his flat, clutching a wall or door-frame for support, I was returned to the Saturday mornings when I would walk my grandfather to synagogue, my hand resting on his elbow until we reached a curb or a crossing when I would press once for up, twice for down: an elderly blind man and his adoring six-year old granddaughter navigating their way through a quiet tree-lined street. Of the old saying, 'We bring our lairs with us,' the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explains: "the house is experienced on the thread of narrative, in the telling of our own story, such that we live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. We are never real historians, but rather always near poets, and our emotions surrounding our onetime homes are perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost" (1994: 5). In an upbringing scarred by volatility and trauma, the time I spent by my grandfather's side looms still as my onetime home. And although Berl's abode, at first glance, is shabby where Ike's was lustrous, his demeanour somewhat resigned and downtrodden, where, in my memory at least, Ike's was dignified

and alive, there is enough in the anatomy of their day-to-day worlds to remind me of a tranche of my poetry that was lost. Both lost their wives and suffered blindness yet lived alone; both were cared for by housekeepers rather than family members; both were decorated for their war efforts; both boasted a rich Rabbinical ancestry and attended synagogue regularly, despite the practical difficulties this imposed. Yes, in many aspects of Berl's lair I found hints of my grandfather's and thus my own world. But what of Berl's lost poetry?

If, as Bachelard suggests, the house is a metaphor for humanness, then Berl's home, crammed as it is with images to which he no longer has access – patterned carpets and faded paintings, shelves crowded with books, clocks and chinaware —nonetheless offers a record of how he has taken root, day after day “in a corner of the world” (1994: 4). The focal points of this corner are two framed photographs: one of his deceased wife, and beside it a likeness of the Vilna Gaon in whose memory Berl walks back and forth to synagogue twice daily, on the arm of his carer, just as Ike Geller did with me. When I rise momentarily from the table, which he has laid in my honour with a plate of hard-boiled eggs and herring, a box of *Matzo*, and a bottle of *Kiddush* wine and walk to the sideboard to examine the Gaon's photo, just in sensing my movements, Berl immediately cautions, “Be careful. The photo is very important to me.” Such is Berl's awareness of his physical world and the items of significance he has placed within it, that a mere shudder should alert him so. For a man who describes himself as “84 and already close to God,” who says of his daily life, which has through the affliction of blindness been reduced to shadows: “I don't have anything you know,” it is perhaps in the physical proximity of his things that he finds a solace unavailable to him elsewhere. The manner in which he safeguards them, how he holds and caresses them, and the depths of meaning which flow forth from them, suggest that it is through his material deposits that he maintains a

semblance of psychic order. In the Freudian view of human experience, objects, through their ability to embody problematic needs, feelings or ideas hold a place of great significance. Things in themselves, Freud argued, do not so much contribute to the wholeness of a person; rather it is the concept of certain objects when seized by the mind of an individual, what the owner projects onto them, that is of importance (1997: 398). Objects, as symbols of the self, enable us to separate and differentiate from others, but also to integrate with others, and both of these dynamic centres, the personal and the social relate not only to each other but also to a third centre of purpose, a spiritual or cosmic realm (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 38). In the case of Berl, an old medal, a rusty key, a prayer book offer an avenue of mediation between the Berl of old and the Berl of today, Berl alone and Berl in the world, and a triangulating arc between Berl alone, with the world and with God. And while this kind of relatedness between things and their owners is true to some extent of everyone, for Berl, whose world has so shrivelled, it appears especially so.

The items which Berl elects as his biographical objects, and even the manner in which he seeks them out from the nooks and crannies of his living space, are more telling or differently telling than his actual words. And because objects are both the products of history and also active agents in history (Auslander 2005: 1016), through them, not only his world, but that of the community of elderly Jews in Vilnius and of his Rabbinical forebears opens out to me. What then is the grammar of Berl's things?



Figure 76. Berl's biographical objects.

For Berl, losing his sight has been “the hardest thing in my life, for it is written in the Bible that a blind person is like a dead person.” Sitting with him in his small flat as dusk falls, it is difficult to escape the sense that he exists in an oppressive limbo state, awaiting release. And this part of his story filters through his objects. It is there in the broken wall clock, the hands of which are stalled permanently at ten minutes to the hour of twelve, whether morning or evening, one cannot know. It is in the pair of spectacles, black with gold arms, sliced directly down the middle, such that they appear now in two halves, one side with glass so thick I can barely see through it, the other side empty. It is in the three pencils, each of differing length and colour, sharpened and ready for use, but long idle. And it is there in the cone-shaped porcelain vase, which his wife bought for him and which, upon her death, he began to use as an ashtray. On the exterior is sculpted a man lying prone, one arm protecting his stomach, the other flung to his side, his long *peyes* (hair locks) partially covered with a *Yarmulke*, his head thrown back in a disturbingly defenceless pose. Berl’s sadness and lack of engagement with the world seep

through all of these. But there is another, older story present in the green velvety yarmulke, the prayer book, the medal he received for his service in the Red Army, and in his most prized possession: a rusty key. The story etched in these objects is one of emboldened action, of the perpetuation of an ancient heritage and of the capacity of prayer to withstand even the greatest horrors. Combined, his collection offers a rare and tangled glimpse into the totality of a man's life – the harrowing and the uplifting, the personal and the communal, the intimate and the universal.

With my eyes closed, I pass my hands over these objects to feel them as he might. I am struck immediately by the variance in sizes and textures: soft velvet, smooth glass, spiky metal, a wall clock the size of a moon, a small medal that fits neatly in my palm. Running my fingers first over the roundness of the clock, across the raised numbers of its circumference, into the middle where a sharp nail juts my skin, down the pointed lines of the hour and minute hands, to the tip, where they are stalled eternally, I have a sense of time freezing. There are no longer any clocks ticking in Berl's home, no sounds of television and few visitors to interrupt his silence. He lives on Biblical time, guided by sunrise and sunset, and his twice daily walks to and from the synagogue which stand as bookends around a seemingly vast nothingness in between. He describes his days thus:

In the morning I go to the synagogue. And then what? I even don't know myself. I go to the courtyard for a walk. Nobody takes care of me... I made a decision that it's much better to think less, but I can't so it's difficult. If I were busy this would be different. But now I have so much free time and in my head I have so many thoughts. Bad thoughts, bad memories. I remember everything.

Sitting across from Berl, engulfed in darkness, I find myself submerged under the immense weight of his memories: the mother who died when he was a baby; the father who remarried and cast him off to live with his grandmother, her sudden death just days

before the outbreak of war; the terrifying occupation of his homeland; the trek on a stolen bicycle across country to warn his father who greeted him with the words, 'I have a new family now'; the news shortly thereafter that his father, new wife and child, his three brothers and sister had all perished at the hands of the Nazis; and then miraculously, a last minute flight to Latvia (on the same bicycle) and his escape across the border, courtesy of the fact that he had the wit to offer the sole officer on duty a cigarette, whereupon he was motioned over to the other side. When asked for an account of his post-war life, he states, without emotion:

After all, I am eighty-four and that's not so little. But even this doesn't bring me joy. My happiest time was when I was a taxi driver. My main goal was to earn bread for the children.... I had no time to think, and now... now when I am free and have nothing to do the bad thoughts come to me. And so this is how it is...

When I inquire what kind of thoughts plague him, he answers:

Nu, thoughts. Do you think it is pleasant when you know there is a fascist demonstration (referring to the Neo-Nazi March through central Vilnius in March 2008), where people are shouting *Juden Raus* (Jews Out) at you and the police are guarding them, like their security, doesn't that bring enough worry, so that's my life.

Yet, from the sensory ethnographic stance, the interview process is not confined to words. And I find through the participatory acts of eating and praying together and later, walking in the cemetery with him, the encounter moves from the desolation which his words express to the spiritedness which his actions embody, the latter defying, or at least going some way towards countering, the former. Sipping his wine, crunching his *Matzos*, shouting out his prayers, slapping his hands on his thigh to indicate his war wound, wrapping his *Tefillin* around his arm- in all of these performative gestures, Berl

seems very much alive. But it is, above all, in the evocation of his special objects and in the presence of his special place that Berl's interior life finds its most eloquent articulation.

In a person's things we locate that which patently matters to them, for objects embody a freight of emotional significance. They are also tools of self-definition; while inanimate they are never inert but rather impose themselves as witnesses to the functional unity of their users, that is they render the everyday experiences of those who own and use them into actions (Hoskins 1998: 8). In so doing, I would suggest, they elevate those experiences beyond the everyday towards the sacred. In Berl's case the link between the sacred and the everyday is literal and highly observable. The religious artefacts with which he surrounds himself – a *Yarmulke*, a prayer-book, a pair of *Tefillin* (phylacteries) – are all outward manifestations and invocations of the sacred. But they are sacred not only in their symbolic, ceremonial function. Lewis Mumford writes:

...the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours but of synchronizing the actions of men...while human life has regularities of its own, the beat of the pulse, the breathing of the lungs, these change from hour to hour with mood and action and in the longer span of days' time is measured not by the calendar but by the events that occupy it (in Turkle 2007: 76).

In the instance of a life divested of purpose, such as Berl describes, it is the *Yarmulke* he wears on his head, even during sleep, the *Tzitzis* (sacred undergarment) hiding beneath his shirt against his skin, the fringes of which he fingers nervously while talking to me, the *Siddur* (prayer-book) whose pages he turns eagerly even though he can no longer read them, the *Tallis* (prayer-shawl), which he takes home each week from the synagogue to wash by hand at his tiny kitchen sink, it is the Hebrew prayers which flow from his mouth – *Kaddish*, *El Molei Rachamin* (prayers of mourning), the prayer for

breaking of bread, for drinking of wine, for rising, before sleep – in all of these 'events' lies the fragile rhythm, the structure and order, the sense of his days. And if we are to regard the sacred as potentially anything that enables us to feel more fully alive, to be connected more viscerally to the eternal life force of all that is, then Berl's objects are sacredly imbued, above and beyond the fact of their ceremonial or religious relevance. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 173) describe the dual meaning of the term cultivation as a process of tending for, taking care of, watching over and also as a means of moving forward or being directed towards some particular course or inclination. Within these descriptors I glimpse an image of Berl bent over his kitchen sink, his arms submerged in water, rinsing out the *Tallis*. I see him separating out his dishes "one set of dishes for milk products, one set of dishes for meat products." I imagine him by his bedside at night, neatly folding his *Tzitsis* and laying them out for the following morning. Through such cultivations of interaction with particular objects, we direct or channel a flow of psychic energy towards them, thus singling them out from that which surrounds them. Anyone casting a glance about our homes will soon decipher what it is that we consider of value to possess. Examined closely our objects reveal the patterns of attention that help to structure our everyday consciousness (185). Even a cursory glance around Berl's small dwelling reveals the locus of his attentions, the seat of his 'everyday consciousness.' Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton further describe flow experiences (186) as a merging of action and awareness, a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, a loss of ego or sense of self through which an individual engages in an intrinsically rewarding transaction with a chosen object to bring about a desired result or goal. Considered in this light, Berl's objects are especially sacred because they continue to command his attention, his energy when almost all else has ceased to do so, because

they tie him to life, to the here and now. They resist, on his behalf, the fierce pull of death.

There are others in Vilnius, no doubt, for whom religious practices of this nature provide a similar antidote to meaninglessness. But for Berl there is little in these daily acts of faith which encourage the collective balm or sense of belonging associated with communal prayer. He describes the synagogue in which he passes so many of his hours as a place “that I cannot say I like a lot,” where people “are envious of each other and make scandals.”



Figure 77. Choral Synagogue, Vilnius, 2008.

The legitimacy of these sentiments are borne out for me when I visit the Choral Synagogue for morning prayers. Standing grand and imposing in the centre of Pylimo Street, the only remaining Vilnius synagogue out of a former 109, the Choral looks today, from the exterior, much as it did when it opened in 1903.



Figure 78. Inside Choral Synagogue, 2008.

Inside, the synagogue has retained elements of the Neoromanesque grandeur of its original construction (Rupeikiene 2008: 134). It is there in the lavish chandelier, in the ornate ark and in the gilded dome above it. But where once this synagogue was filled to capacity, on the morning of my visit there are only 10 old men, including Berl, scattered across the aisles. The Rabbi faces the Ark. Behind him, the men pray in discordant fashion, one mouthing the words, another singing, others mid-conversation. Most of these men, I later discover, are paid a weekly stipend to attend services by the Jewish Community of Lithuania so as to make up the *Minyan* – quorum of ten men required for daily prayers – in an effort to satisfy a 1995 restitution law decreeing that only observant members of religious communities, which had existed prior to 1940, have the right to reclaim confiscated property. At the time of our visit, a second 1997 bill calling for the return of Jewish property or the compensation for said property had yet to reach the

Seimas (parliament). Explaining this lapse, the government's then Advisor on Jewish Affairs, Vilius Kavaliauskas, pointed to the recent Fascist march as rationale for waiting until *after* the upcoming election to send the bill to parliament. On November 4th, 2010, the first reading of the Jewish Communal Property Restitution Bill, stipulating the return of 128 million litas over an 11-year period, passed the Seimas, to be resubmitted at a later date for ratification. Almost as an afterthought the Bill cautioned that a “possible detrimental consequence of the draft law is the temporary rise in anti-Semitism” (Katz: 2011b). And it is against this backdrop of intense, protracted negotiation and the very real threat of a renewed outbreak of anti-Semitic activity that a group of impoverished old men travel back and forth to synagogue twice each day, the stewards, appointed by default, of an eroding legacy.

Aside from the challenges posed by poverty, dwindling numbers and the ongoing struggle for restitution, the community has been beset by antagonisms from within. Most controversially, among these, was the resurfacing of the old *Mitnageddic/Hasidic* conflict in May 2004 which resulted in a fist-fight during *Shavout* services between opposing factions, forcing the temporary closure of the synagogue, marking the first such occasion since the Holocaust. Berl’s misgivings are thus well-founded, but in listening to him, it becomes clear that the bitterness he harbours relates more than anything to his own biography of regret.

Even after the war, his life did not improve significantly. He recalls, despondently, arriving in Vilnius with nowhere to go. At first he roomed with a group of soldiers in a large attic and later “took over” an empty apartment in central Vilnius. Shortly thereafter he met a young Jewish woman, the sole survivor of her family who had travelled to Lithuania on forged documents. Very much in love, Berl married her. One evening, he arrived home from work to find her with another man, her bag already

packed. "I didn't ask questions," he says, "I told her, 'Take everything and leave, all that I bought for you.' For three months, I heard nothing, and then a letter— 'I am ashamed, will you take me back?'"

Berl never answered that letter, but the betrayal cut him deeply. "Do you understand my situation?" he asks, " I loved her, I loved her, I was permanently thinking about her, thinking about them, but when I received this letter, a pride raised its head in me, and I said I don't need you. I met another Jewish girl and married her. So that's the story." Of his second wife, Berl says only: "My wife is gone now; she was sick, she had surgery, she was cut and she died, that's it. It was in 1991, she was 65-years-old. That's all. And so now for 17 years I have been living alone."

He had two children with his second wife, but even they do not bring him pleasure. Of his son he says, "He is quite nice but my daughter-in-law is a witch... it's like she is waiting for my death. Of his carer, paid for by the Jewish Community, he says: "There is no guarantee that she will come, one day she comes, the next she doesn't. For instance if she feels offended, she won't come, so you know I'm so dependant. I am dependant on others." And it is this, the loss of his sight, and subsequent dependence on others, that is most the crushing loss of all. But it is not only private tragedy that Berl carries. Of his township of Nemačsciai, he tells me:

Maybe it's good that I survived, but it's so sad what happened in my town. The people who lived there were forced to go to work every day, and had to walk three miles outside the town. They were told to dig a big pit, very deep, because it was going to be used as a storage, like a warehouse for food. And when it was finished some didn't even have a chance to get out, but the soldiers came with a truck filled with earth and poured it on top of them and buried them alive.

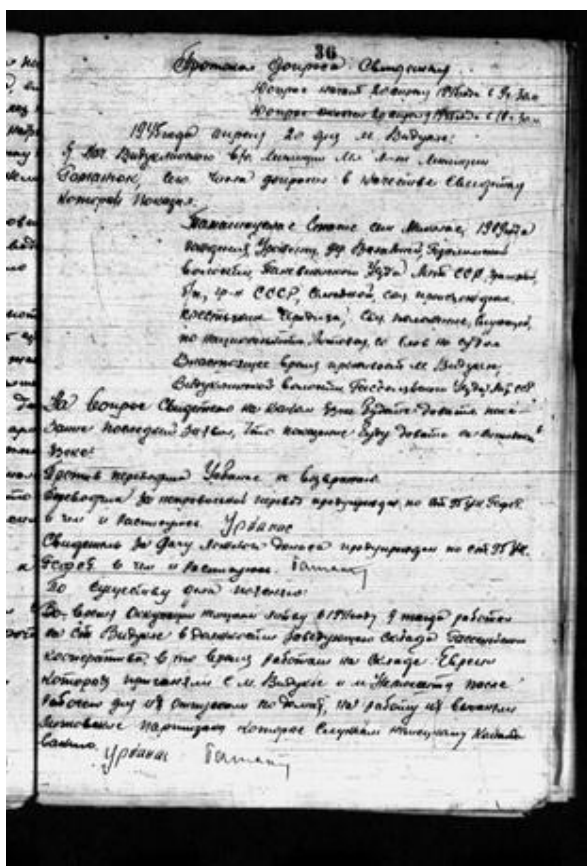


Figure 79. Tamasauskas Stasys' witness statement.
Source: Lithuanian Central State Archives.

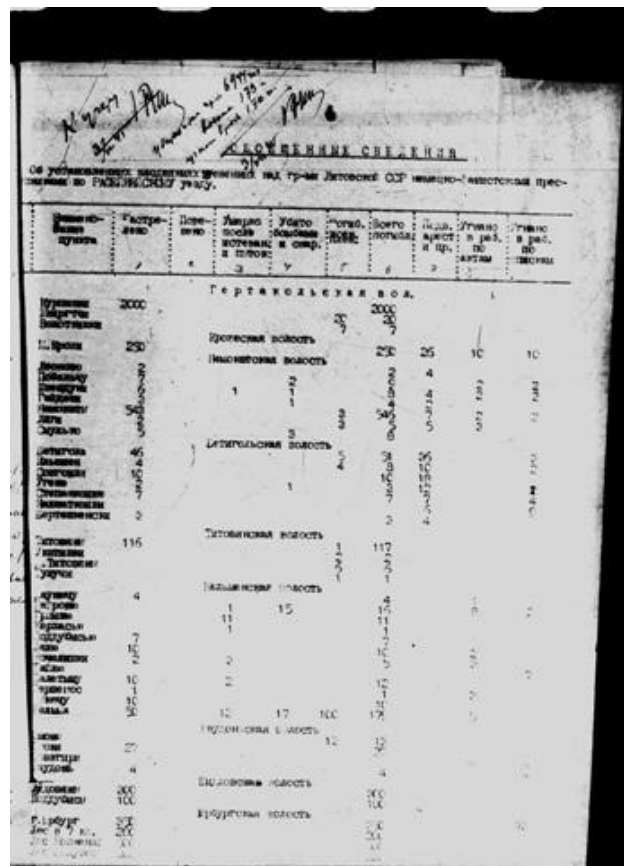


Figure 80. Ledger listing names of deceased at Nemaksciai.
Source: Lithuanian Central State Archives.

The incident to which he refers was described on 20th April 1945 by Tamasauskas Stasys, a former Lithuanian officer who, when questioned about his involvement in the massacre, explained how Jews from Nemaščiai were marched to work on the outskirts of town and ordered to dig out an underground warehouse. In July 1941, they were ordered to gather beside the warehouse, then forced to run towards the pit in groups of 10 as the Gestapo shot them, then another 10, who fell in on top of the first group, and so on. That day, Stasys testifies, “about 200 Jewish people were murdered. And there was a well at a distance of one hundred meters from the pit. The water turned red in the well” (R-142/28/20: Lithuanian Central State Archives).

After Berl has finished his account, there ensues a long, awkward silence during which he stares straight ahead, engulfed by sadness. Finally he says: “The people in the

town never talked about this... but they should dig up the pit and bury the bones properly.” Looking at him as he calls to mind the massacre of his father and former neighbours, palpably sensing the tyranny his past has wrought upon him, from which the daulyness of his life offers little reprieve, it is hard to imagine that he was once an individual of extraordinary resilience, courage and enterprise. And yet, these qualities are sprinkled liberally throughout his story.

In July 1941, having made his way to the Latvian border and crossed it courtesy of “God and the cigarettes,” he jumped on a train which ferried him deep into the Soviet interior where he found work lugging bricks downriver on horseback. With winter approaching, as he had no coat and little food, he made his way to a collective farm where, after several weeks, he was recruited to the 16th Lithuanian Division of the Russian army. When asked why he had enlisted so readily, Berl explains: “Before, we had a hope that maybe we would find somebody alive, but by then we knew that our parents had died, our sisters had died, everyone had died. And in general life was so horrible, people dying of hunger; we were young men, so we said, we will go... so at the age of 18 I was already in the army.”

Describing this exact timeframe in his collection of memoirs of Jewish soldiers from the ranks of the Red Army, Lithuanian-born historian, Dov Levin, himself a survivor and former Red Army soldier, explains that some 15,000 Jewish men, women and children, who had escaped Lithuania just before the Nazi invasion, travelled across the country by foot or by car, “in the blazing sun and under bombardment of the Luftwaffe,” desperate to reach the interior of the Soviet Union. There they settled in the towns and on the *kolkhozes* (collective farms). At the start of 1942, Levin recalls, recruitment offices across the Soviet Union began to call up Lithuanians and the 16th

Rifle Division of the Red Army was formed. Jewish soldiers constituted a recognizable majority of this division with the 167th Rifle Brigade (Berl's unit) tagged explicitly as the "Jewish Company" (Levin 2009: 1). When I ask Berl about his time in the army, he says:

My daily life, it was very simple, we were children of 18 ... we got food and they taught us how to shoot, how to operate and clean guns. In the autumn we were loaded onto a train and sent to the front. We stood for battle in the Orel region in February....The snow was everywhere. We had orders to move forward. So we would move during the night and in the day we had to get some rest. But by the time we found a place to rest like some little hut it was time to move forward again, and what to say about the food? No meals, no sleep, we would sleep while walking. A machine gun was hanging on me this way, you see (indicating how he propped himself up on it) and I put my hands on it and I slept. I moved forward and slept. We would lean against each other and sleep. We were so terribly tired. There were so many injured, so many killed. We were just moving forward to death.

Describing these very circumstances, Franas Petronis, Major General in the Reserve, recalls:

In August 1942 our division was transferred to the front in the Tula area... In December we were ordered to the Orel-Kursk sector of the front ... on the hard march over hundreds of kilometres to the front the soldiers grew very weak... the temperature at night dropped to tens of degrees below zero. During the attacks I saw with my own eyes how the injured died on that snow-covered plain. There was no way to approach them in daylight because enemy fire covered anyone who attempted to help the wounded. The wounded lay bleeding and were destined to bleed to death in the snow for hours. (Leivers 2009: 41).



Figure 81. 16th Lithuanian Division soldiers in action in Russia. Source: Leivers, 2009

It was thus that 18-year-old Berl Glazer ventured towards manhood on a snow-covered plain surrounded by death. There is nothing in the starkness of his tale that hints at bravery, and yet of his Jewish soldiers, the commander of the 167th Brigade remarked: “In training I couldn’t get those Jews on their feet, but in battle I couldn’t get them down, they charged at the enemy with their heads held high. Many from among the thousands of Jewish soldiers that were the backbone of the infantry units were badly injured. Hundreds were buried in the military mass graves there” (Levin 2009: 5). Berl was among the number injured, “but I was young,” he says, “so I survived, good that I was able to still crawl, and they put all the heavily wounded onto cattle trucks and transferred us to a hospital... and they put plaster here, there some plaster, all over me, and in this condition I stayed for six months and then they asked me where do you want to go. Where could I go? I had nobody.”

Berl eventually found his way to Vilnius, where after a year without work he secured the vacant apartment on Vilnius Street 28. For their efforts thousands of soldiers from the 16th Division received honourable mention medals, with some awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union award (Levin 2009: 1). Berl was among those selected to receive this highest of honours and it is this that he suggests as one of his biographical objects, explaining that he will *show* me the actual medal, but in its place *give* me a substitute medal for good workmanship, one of 20 or so he received from the Soviet Union, “every year a different medal.” At this point in our exchange, he rises slowly from the table and shuffles towards the bedroom. From where I am seated I watch him groping in the dark until he reaches his wardrobe, muttering to himself as he attempts to locate the small wooden box in which his medals are housed. He returns to the table, box in hand, lays it out before us and, feeling his way along the ridges and over the face of each of these

medals, eventually identifies the two he is searching for. When I inquire what this Hero Award means to him, he laughs:

I was given a medal for the courage I showed in the great patriotic war, you see I was a gunman, and I had a machine gun. I wasn't attacked. I stood right. We were told to go straight forward and I went straight forward as well, quite successfully. We stood firm, we didn't run like others. So we were attacked by Germans, by local Fascists, and what to do, where to go? So mine is a first grade medal... you had to earn this medal.

Listening to Berl describe over and over this condition of immobility, watching him trundle back and forth to his bedroom in small, tentative steps, I am aware that this man, whose story is so suffused with action – he *jumped* on a bicycle, he *fled* his country, he *escaped* across a border, he *hitched* a ride on a train, he *rode* horses downriver, he *marched* to the front, he *crawled* away when wounded, he *drove* a bus and then a taxi for work – has arrived at a virtual standstill. The bodily actions he undertakes now are of the smallest kind, the slow steps around his flat, the picking up and laying down of his prayer accessories, the opening and closing of his mouth, of his eyes. Exploring the connection between narrative and journeying, Jackson notes that in almost every human society people fare forth at the beginning of each day from some hearth or home-place to which they return at the close of the day to rest, recover and recount the stories of what has befallen them (2006: 31). What then happens, he asks, when there are no more journeys left to be made, no reasons to venture forth, what of our narratives and our lives then? And it is this, I believe, that is at the crux of Berl's daily outings to synagogue. Yes, he ventures forth each morning and evening because he explains, as a Jew, "I go, because I must." Yes, there is an inherently spiritual rationale behind this decision. But there is also something else. In *Wanderlust*, her history of walking, Solnit

contends that walking allows us to be in our bodies and yet, at once, with the world (2001: 5). For her, walking, ultimately, is about how we invest universal acts with particular meaning. She describes the pilgrim as a “walker toiling along a road to some distant place [...] reliant on strength of body and will,” moving through a spiritualized geography in the hopes that arrival at a tangible destination will release a spiritual benefit (53). For Berl then, these daily outings also constitute a form of pilgrimage, through a potential geography of spiritual power which he continues to draw towards him. But these daily sorties, just like the prayer book, the prayer shawl, the *Yarmulke* and the *Tefillin* are sacred beyond the scope of their inherent holiness. Jackson contends that walking is linked to the pivotal moment of ontogeny when a child is separated from family and moves from the private to the public sphere, becoming an autonomous being, a fully-fledged member of his or her community (2006: 225). For Berl then, walking is a way of entering a public domain, but it is also, I imagine, the walking that hauls him day after day, inch by inch out of the snow-filled ditch on the plain of death, from the bone-strewn pit and the blood-soaked well to which his thoughts and his memories have long been strapped.



Figure 82. Berl and his carer on the way to synagogue, 2008.

For Berl, there is a temporality and a materiality to this spiritual undertaking. In his daily geography of actions – the leave-taking from his home on the arm of his carer, the finger raised to touch the *Mezzuzah* on his door frame, then held to his mouth for a kiss on the way out, the painstaking, deliberate descent down the stairs, the trek down the hill, around the corner, and finally the hand outstretched to touch, at last, the synagogue gates – though all of these, he moves from nowhere to somewhere, from nothing to something. De Certeau writes of “pedestrian speech acts” stressing that the act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speech is to language: a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian, a “spatial acting out” of the place and an implication of “relations” among differentiated positions, all of which, he says, provide a preliminary definition of the act of walking as a space of enunciation (1984: 98). In this framework of enunciation, the walker constitutes, in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a here and a there (99). And while all of our journeys are similarly configured, in that they carry us from a here to a there, Berl’s are especially weighted. In his daily motions lie a rhythm, an order, but therein also resides a highly personal declaration, an enunciation of ongoing aliveness.

That Berl, when I meet him, already considers himself a man of diminished capacity, at a loss to fill the swathes of time that stretch between one day and the next with meaningful activity, is evident through much of his testimony, but nowhere is it more manifest than in relation to the cemetery at Seskine. When asked to show us a special place, he immediately invites us to accompany him to Seskine, where for 10 years, until blindness intervened, he tended the Vilna Gaon's mausoleum. When we arrive on his doorstep the following afternoon, we find him in energized mode, dressed in a suit and hat as if embarking on a special outing.



Figure 83. A bucket of stones and washing vessel at Seskine Cemetery, 2008.

Inside the van, I notice that he is clutching a large bunch of keys, fingering along the ridges of each, just as he had done with the medals, until he is satisfied that he has identified the right one which he then holds up for us to see, announcing proudly that he is among the very few to have been entrusted with a key to the Gaon's resting place. When we arrive at Seskine, we are met by a high wall and iron entrance gates. Just inside is a plaque with the inscription of the traditional blessing recited upon entering a Jewish cemetery. Beside it sits a bucket of stones for visitors wishing to partake in the ancient Jewish tradition of placing a stone at the gravesite of a loved one, a practice whose origins are unclear: some suggest that this is to show that the loved one has not been left unremembered, others say that it is to show that the process of building a grave is ongoing, perpetual and never completed. Beside the bucket for stones are two more buckets, a larger one filled with water and a smaller one used for the ritual hand washing before and after visiting a grave. Once we have washed our hands, Berl *leads* Ruta by the

arm, step by step, down the long path through the cemetery, stopping first by the gravesides of two Rabbis from among his own ancestors whose remains he arranged to have transferred here during the Soviet era. From there he directs us towards the mausoleum, 52 steps straight ahead – he mouths the numbers as he walks – then left 22 steps, then right four steps, and there we are, facing a small structure, set back from the mass of graves that surround it. Standing proudly at the opening to the mausoleum, he explains that previously the Gaon’s remains had been marked only by a small stone, “like one made only for a little child,” and that on seeing this he had approached the synagogue’s elders and suggested that they construct a more appropriate headstone, befitting a Rabbinical scholar of such international stature. With money raised from abroad, he explains, they “lifted up the wall, and made a grave stone that is larger, and a board with inscriptions that this grave stone was done by this certain worker and... Berl Glazer.”



Figure 84. Berl at the Vilna Gaon Mausoleum.

Watching Berl as he points his cane upwards towards the fruits of his labours, notwithstanding the fact that he himself can no longer see them, calls to mind Dilthey's notion of expression, as signs and symbols which "gather together" and "fix" lived experience (Kepnes 1992: 9). In Berl's expression there is again a sense of cultivation, as described by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton: the tending to, taking care of, the watching over, "the improvement, development, refinement or resultant expression of some object or habit of life, due to care or inquiry" (1981: 173). For 10 years, week in, week out, Berl made the 12-kilometre trek back and forth from Vilnius to tend this monument. He cleaned, he swept, he scrubbed, he polished, he removed leaves and debris in an experience which he describes now as his "greatest living achievement." That he can no longer do so pains him greatly, and yet, his building of the Gaon's grave is ongoing, perpetual. Architecture, the curator Christopher Woodward, has written is a material expression of the human spirit: our experiences, our hopes and aspirations, our sadnesses solidified in brick and stone (2002: 53). Here then, inscribed on this mausoleum lies the purest expression of Berl's spirit, here embedded is the apex of his life's work, more vital to him than his fellow congregants at the synagogue or even members of his own family. Jung has written that as humans we need to project ourselves into the things around us, that the self is not confined to the body, but extends into all the things we have made, and that without these things, we would not be human beings at all, but merely human (2002: 155). And it is true that in this space, beside the thing that he has made, here amidst the dead, Berl is more animated, more fully alive.

Memorials and relics are never solely personal and if these stones speak to and of Berl, affording him a sense of purpose, animating him in a manner which his oral testimony alone could not, they also carry within the sounds of the deep, fractured and

complex history of Lithuania's Jewish communities. So it is when Berl fusses with the key and finally manages to thrust it into the lock, swinging open a small gate to reveal several flat, unremarkable graves, the Gaon's smothered with notes and letters and stones left by visitors, he is opening a doorway not only onto his own inner world and the forces which give it meaning, but also onto a plateau of history.



Figure 85. Stones and messages in the Gaon's mausoleum.

In Jewish tradition, burial is rearded as a *khesed shel emeth*, a supreme act of loving kindness for which there is no earthly reward. Wherever Jews have lived, however inhospitable the conditions in which they have found themselves, writes literary and cultural historian, David Roskies, “the last and most stubborn holdout of tradition is the way they bury their dead” (1999: 120). Yet in Vilnius, even this, the most obdurate of Jewish conventions, has met with insurmountable challenges. The first Jewish cemetery

in the city, which is said to date back to 1487, was located in Snipiskes on the bank of the River Neris. This is where the Gaon and his family were originally buried, alongside many of the late Rabbinical scholars of Vilna. Snipiskes was formally closed by Tsarist authorities in 1831 and left untampered with until 1949 when the Zalgiris Stadium was constructed over part of it, at which point, Soviet authorities allowed for the transfer of the Gaon's remains to the newer cemetery at Seskine (Agranovski and Guzenberg 2008: 48). A second Jewish cemetery of 70,000 souls, opened in Zarechye in the 1820s when Snipiskes became full, was desecrated in 1961 when its gravestones were dug up by the Soviets and reused for construction projects throughout the city, including the laying of large stone steps leading up to the Communist Party Headquarters (49). And such conflicts around Jewish burial have not abated. In 2005, the matter resurfaced when apartment buildings were constructed on the remaining plot at Snipiskes. Plans for a second set of buildings, approved in 2007, sparked an international outcry, resulting in the passing of a motion in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008, condemning Lithuania for its “failure to protect the historic Jewish cemetery in Vilnius” (Kastner 2010). A geophysical survey to establish the exact boundaries of the cemetery site concluded that the King Mindaugas buildings were in fact erected within the boundaries of the Snipiskes Jewish cemetery, although the developers insisted that while bones had been identified there was no way to know if these were human or animal. In 2007, the *Vilnius-Life* website reported on the matter as follows:

So what's all the fuss? Well, earlier this month Jewish groups raised their concern over the proposed construction of apartment blocks on what may or may not be/may or may not have been a Jewish cemetery in Vilnius. The proposed construction creeps dangerously close to Snipiskes cemetery, which, by virtue of its Jewishness, is obviously a part of Israel making an international territorial dispute out of the matter. Rest assured, the Israeli government and Jewish Diaspora at large have brought the issue to the attention of the EU. US

presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton (yeah her) has even written a condemning letter to the Lithuanian government. Forgive us, but what seems to have gone overlooked in all the demonstrations and Foreign Ministry meetings on the matter is this: On the site of the Jewish cemetery where construction has been proposed...there is no Jewish cemetery.

Allow us to explain. Snipiskes cemetery was closed by Tsarist Russian authorities in 1831. No one has been laid to rest there since the mid-19th century. In the 1950s, Soviet authorities built a stadium and concert hall on what borders Snipiskes cemetery, and it is assumed that there are Jewish remains beneath that site, because isn't it just so Soviet to build over part of a cemetery?

Jewish groups claim that the site is still sacred despite the fact that it's a Soviet stadium - one of the least sacred sights in Vilnius today. Now the Lithuanian government is being criticised for wanting to build over a site that may or not have been sacred at one time; and, if so, was desecrated first by Tsarist Russia, second by the USSR, now by them?

To address the issue (which is currently on a world tour of Lithuanian embassies, and earning top-dollar endorsements from the Jewish community), Lithuanian Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas has formed a task force to decide the future of the controversial plot of concrete. We're guessing there'll be a monument somewhere by the end of the year. Whether it will be enough to appease the Jewish community is unclear (2007).

In the context of Jewish Vilna then, Berl too is a memory bearer. His is a story of a commemorative act undertaken by a man intent on honouring his Rabbinical master. While, for him, this constitutes a private undertaking, he is also, in carrying it out, upholding the remembrance of his people. The material nature of objects and places means that they have the capacity to carry the past physically into the present. Thus, Berl's objects – a prayer book, a *Yarmulke*, a medal and a rusty key – have led me to a history of remains buried, dug up and re-interred, of souls trampled, of cemeteries bulldozed, of streets and municipal buildings paved with the markers of the dead, of sports pavilions, concert halls and apartment blocks smothering over consecrated ground.

And through all of that, Berl's objects have led me to the space wherein a man and his history intersect. In a Jungian sense, the objects which we invest with symbolic significance are those which form a bridge between our conscious and unconscious minds, between the earthly and the sacred (Pearce 1994: 131). At the age of 48, Jung repaired to a retreat at Bollingen on the edge of Lake Zurich and built a crude stone tower, where the "souls of his ancestors would feel sustained" (Jung 2002: 3). Describing this tower, he wrote: "My ancestors' souls are sustained by the atmosphere of the house since I answer for them the questions that their lives once left behind. I carve out rough answers as best I can. I have even drawn them on the walls. It is as if a silent, greater family, stretching down the centuries, were peopling the house" (36). I have a sense then of Berl's ancestors – his Rabbinical forebears, his father, mother, grandmother, brothers and sister, his comrades in battle, the townspeople of Nemaksciai – all of them somehow held aloft. Through his actions, however small, he attempts to answer the questions that their lives left behind.

Throughout my interactions with Berl, I have been faced repeatedly with the question of what happens to a man divested of a way of being in the world. When who he is and what he does is forcibly removed from him, what can be then become? Frankl contests that the true meaning of life is to be found in the world, rather than within man or his own psyche (1985: 75). Transactions between man and the objects he surrounds himself with further this process by helping in the creation of a world of one's own, in which one makes some kind of difference (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 190). Through such transactions, such cultivation, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue, individuals strive to align their personal, social and cosmic or spiritual selves, that is, the self assured of its relative autonomy, the self related to a social

network, family, citizens, the living and the dead and the self which strives for connection to the larger forces of harmony in the universe (191). And even though Berl describes the synagogue as a “place I cannot say I like a lot,” even though he may well feel that “only five people will remember me in a good way,” it is clear that his flow of energy towards his objects and his places connects him deeply to the here and now, to a larger network of Jewish life, to the spiritual essence of the departed and to the arc of history on which his entire existence is strung. Above all, they bind him to God.

“I have to believe,” he says towards the end of our interview: “God is here, you have to know that, there is only one God.” I leave Berl in the knowledge that he, at 84, *is* already close to God.

The Memory Bearer:

Invitation To An Orphanage, A Library And A Museum



Figure 86. Rachel's visual biographical exhibit/Surviving History exhibition.

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 *Mezzuzah* as her biographical object. Instead she has elected to give me an invitation. Much like any other formal invitation in appearance, this one, from the British Ambassador to Lithuania, requests the 'pleasure of the company of Ms. Rachel Kostanian and spouse' to a reception celebrating the Official Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. When, after hours of deliberation, 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 Siauliai 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 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, the Yiddish lullabys her

mother would sing her to sleep, the names of the 80 family members she lost and 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 and 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.



Figure 87. Invitation from British Embassy.

It is possible then, to view her 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).



Figure 88. Rachel at the Green House Museum, 2008.

This “lighthouse of historical awareness” is among the first places I visit in Vilnius. I find Rachel in a small office, surrounded by a cluster of women of varying age, busied in the acts of archiving, cataloguing and typing. Over the course of many hours,

she regales me 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. 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 film so that future generations can know of Jewish history. When I inquire how she stays motivated, she replies: "My dead family and pills."

While all the survivors we meet lay claim to a raw and painful past, there are few who have subsumed their own identities beneath the broader collective mantel 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 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.



Figure 89. Rachel with her cousin who perished in Ponar. Source: Kostanian

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 Siauliai, where a 10-year-old girl is hiding behind the curtains to surprise her parents, Yosif Zivelchinski, a local Chief Justice and Bluma Danizg-Zivelchinski, a Yiddish teacher, when they return from work. The date is the 22nd of 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. 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 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.”

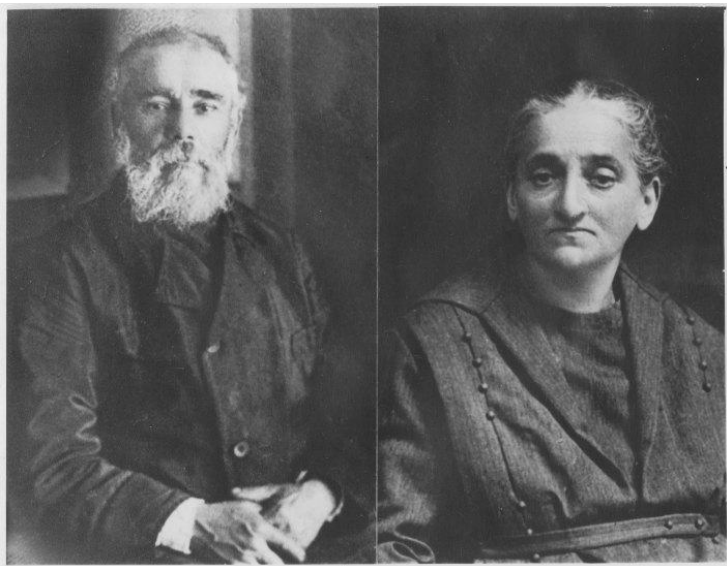


Figure 90. Rachel’s maternal grandparents. Source: Kostanian

And what were they leaving behind? By the time war broke out in 1941, Siauliai 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 Jewish schools. Community members, including Rachel’s parents, were active in Jewish cultural life and civic affairs. There was even a Jewish vice-mayor.



Figure 91. Rachel's mother and her class at the local Yiddish school. Source: Kostanian

Rachel attended the *folk shul* (elementary school) and her earliest recollections are populated by “happy classmates and dedicated teachers, who loved the children, as their own.” This idyllic scene, however, was soon to change. The fate that would have surely awaited Rachel had she stayed is depicted in the following eyewitness account by forester Pranus Bragdonas, recorded after the Soviets exhumed the massacre pits in the Gubernija Forest near Siauliai in 1944. This provides evidence, not only of the cruelty of Nazi commanders, but also of the involvement of local Lithuanian collaborators.

On 7-15 September 1941, Jewish people – men, women and children – were shot. They were brought from Siauliai. 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 (R-159/3/1/30: Lithuanian Central State Archives) .

By fleeing Siauliai that June morning, the family may have escaped internment in the ghetto and eventual death at the pits, but they did not emerge unscathed. They made their way hurriedly from their home to a mini-bus waiting to evacuate Siauliai VIPs. Rachel's father, as Chief Justice, was counted among them. With the bombs raining down, they travelled across an open field toward the railway station where the woman and children were placed on a train bound for Russia. The men planned to return to Siauliai 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 is this?' 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."



Figure 92. Photo of Rachel's father.

Source: Kostanian

While her father was facing down his end, Rachel and her mother were rumbling through the Russian interior and would learn only much later of his demise. After several days, they reached Gorky where Rachel's two cousins, the only survivors of the combined Zevelchinki-Danzig families, resided. With Bluma's health deteriorating, she decided to send Rachel to a *kinderhome* in the Ural mountains, established for children who had fled alone or whose parents had already perished. This makeshift orphanage in Debesy (meaning sky in English) was to become Rachel's habitat for the next three 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* roamed the fields, hunting for grasses, leaves, seeds and bark to eat, apart from which their main diet consisted of oats. 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 three 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. Till now I still have such a strong desire to sit on my mother’s knee” (Ju 2006).



Figure 93. Winter in Debesy.
Source: Ju, 2006.

It is not only in the descriptions of such inner longings that their accounts coalesce, but 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 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 ... 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).



Figure 94. A gabled gate in Debesy.
Source: Ju, 2006.

When I ask Rachel what in her allowed her to respond so viscerally to this natural beauty, 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, 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 (1988: 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 identity formation, implies that it does indeed, in Kaufman’s terms, constitute a site, wherein “stories of history, tradition and shared memory” are held (Kaufman 39).



Figure 95. The orphanage in Debesy. Source: Ju, 2006.

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 Debussy 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 embattled communities, widely shared political and cultural narratives furnish important psychic resources of strength, hope and resilience, providing a collective means to combat the disintegration and withdrawal of the 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 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 – 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 merging, the end of the war marked a departure from the home itself but also from collectivity and, thus, a return to individuality. Here their stories begin to diverge.



Figure 96. Rachel's mother. Source: Kostanian

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). Rachel, alone among her peers, “stepped down” in Gorky where Bluma was

standing on the platform to greet her. At summer's end they 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. They were given "a small room in a corridor, where," Rachel recalls, "one door was to our room, 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 Argentinian 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," the library loomed as a space of refuge even beyond Manguel's wide-ranging portrayal. For her, the bricks and mortar library *was* home. 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 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 other Jewish families, and just as in Debesy, where the children became her 'brothers and sisters,' here too she says, “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 see and hear what we hear,” 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 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 (themselves writers and poets) who salvaged their literary inheritance from the ashes.

Growing up, listening to her mother read the tales of Sholem Aleichem and his character Tevye, the nomadic milkman, forced on from place to place (Kushner 2009: xvi), 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, Kacerginski, 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 re-open the Jewish museum which was a very difficult task, but thanks to the efforts of Sutzkever, Kacerginski 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.



Figure 97. Sutzkever and Kacerginski of the Paper Brigade.

Source: Fishman, 1996

Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kacerginski in the Vilna Ghetto, July 20, 1943.

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 June 24th, 1942, a representative of the Special Detail of 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 *Judenforschung ohne Juden* or Jewish Studies without Jews. 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. 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).



Shmerke Kaczerginski sorting Jewish books for the Rosenberg-squad in the YIVO building, 1942-1943.

Figure 98. Paper Brigade at YIVO. Source: Fishman, 1996

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 ‘*selektzia*’ - between life and death, with those deemed of value transferred to Frankfurt, the rest shipped to a nearby paper mill for recycling (Fishman 1996: 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). And 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: “Kalmanovich 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. Describing the actions 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...” Rachel’s 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, Bialik and original artwork by Chagall, Repin, and Antokolsky (Fishman 2006: 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 paralyzed mother, and eventually the attic of the YIVO building itself. Despite these efforts, however, shipments to the paper mills accelerated. In what would prove one of his last diary entries, Kalmonovich 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” (Fishman: 2006: 10). For Kalmanovich 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. 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 July 26th, 1944, just 13 days after liberation, Sutzkever 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 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.



Sutzkever stands beside the ruins of the YIVO building, May, 1946.



Shmerke Kaczerginski stands among rescued sculptures, paintings and documents, 1944 or 1945.

Figure 99. YIVO building in ruins.

Source: Fishman, 1996



Figure 100. Sutzkever, Kovner and Abramovitch with a wagon of recovered materials.

Source: Fishman, 1996

These walls, Rachel writes in her text, *Jewish Cultural Heritage of Lithuania*, “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). And there in the very rooms where, months earlier, Jewish inmates had been tortured by the Nazis, the museum staff, under Sutzkever's direction, 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 2006: 13). When, in the ensuing months, KGB officials began conducting surprise raids on the museum and censoring their 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 2006: 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* (The Book Palace). This is how the Soviet Authorities, in their campaign against Cosmopolitanism and Zionism liquidated the Jewish museum” (1996: 10).

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 which only came to light after his retirement. At a 2002 ceremony in Vilnius marking the return of 30 Torah scrolls from the Lithuanian government to the Jewish Community, 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). Ulpis' private cache would remain in the inner recesses of the Lithuanian National Book Chamber for the next 40 years.

During that time, Jewish culture – books, language, ritual – disappeared under a dense Soviet fog. 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, 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 late 1980s 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 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 & Durrheim 2000: 27). Who then could Rachel and her peers become in a 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.”

And 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 recently published book on Soviet Jewry, *When They Come For Us We’ll be Gone* in which he describes the lot of the 3,000,000 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).

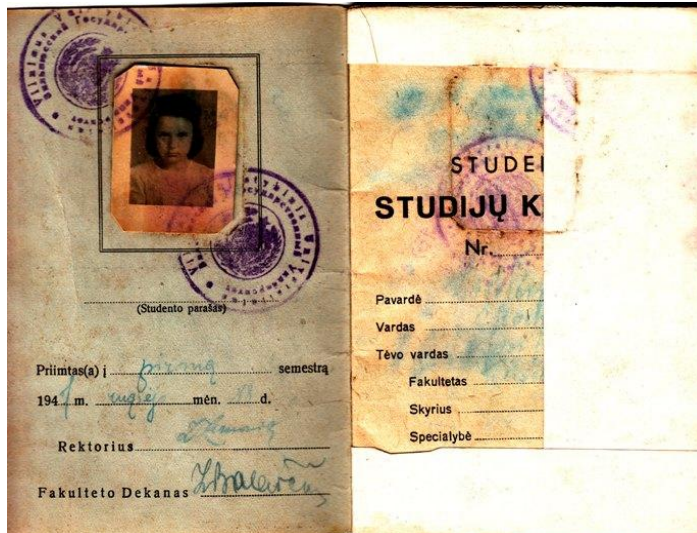


Figure 101. Rachel's student card. Source: Kostanian

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 (in Beckerman 2011: 119).

NUORAŠAS:

DIPLOMAS № 499122
su p a g y r i m u

Šis diplomas išduotas KOSTANIAN Recha, Jesife

pažymėti, kad ji: 19 55 metais

Vilniaus Valstybinio Pedagoginio Instituto Užsienio kalbų fakultetą
įstojo į fakultetą anglų kalbos
ir 19 60 metais baigė šio specialybės visą kursą.

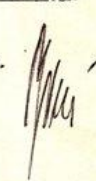
Valstybinės egzaminų komisijos 19 60 rugpiūčio mėn. 3 d. p. nutarimu:
KOSTANIAN Rechai, Jesife pripažinta
vidurinės mokyklos anglų kalbos mokytoja kvalifikacija.

Valstybinės egzaminų komisijos pirmininkas (parašas)
Rektorius (parašas) Vilnius, 19 60 m. Sekretorius (parašas) rugpiūčio mėn. 6 d.
REGISTRACIJOS Nr. 1967

(Antspaudu tekstas: LTSR Ministrų Tarybos Valst. aukštojo ir specialiojo
vidurinio mokslo komitetas Vilniaus Valst. Pedagoginio Instituto.
19 73 m. vasario mėnesio 7 diena.)
Aš, Vilniaus valst. notarinės kontoros notaras (ė) K. Milevišienė liudiju,

kad šis nuorašas visiškai atitinka originalą, kuriame patalsimų, prirašymų, užbrauktų žodžių, trynimų ir
kitų neleistinimų nebuvo. Valstybinio mokesčio paimta 0,20 rb.

Registro eilės Nr. 2-2612

Notaras. 




Figure 102. Rachel's diploma upon successful completion of her studies. Source: Kostanian

Through these years of 'two-fold life', Rachel studied law yet found it difficult to advance because as a Jew because “nobody wanted me, I had excellent grades, but 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. Whilst 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 five 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 stuff, 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 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 also 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 of 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 Brothers and Sisters 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" And 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.



Figure 103. The Green House Museum in Vilnius, 2008.

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 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 6th September, 1989 the Soviet administration ordered the re-opening of the Jewish State Museum in Vilnius, 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). At the outset, Rachel's 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. It was only two years later – after she had witnessed the steady train of heritage tourists from Germany, South Africa, Argentina, from England, from America, 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 Siauliai 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 (Kostanian 2006: 272). 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.

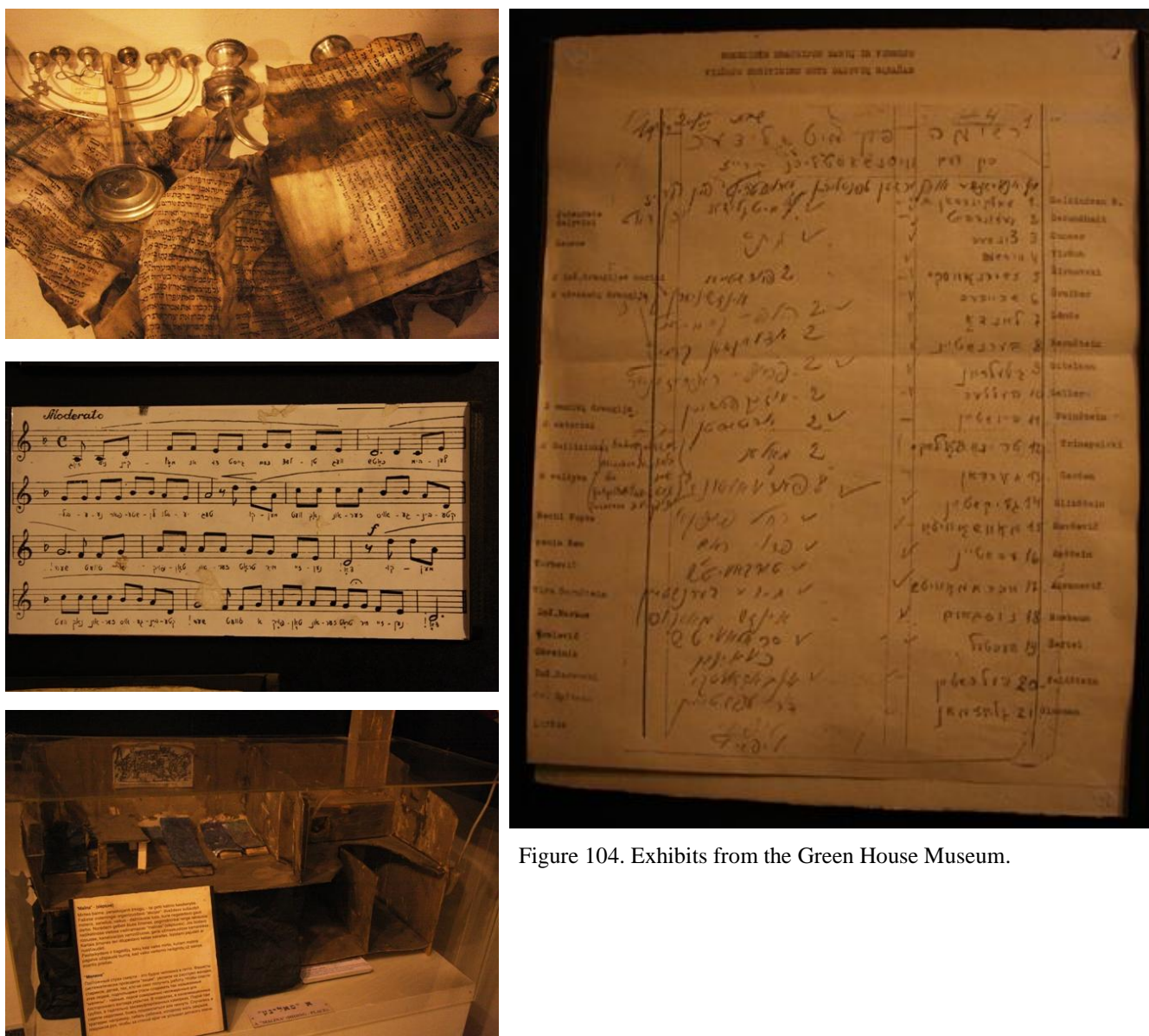


Figure 104. Exhibits from the Green House Museum.

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).

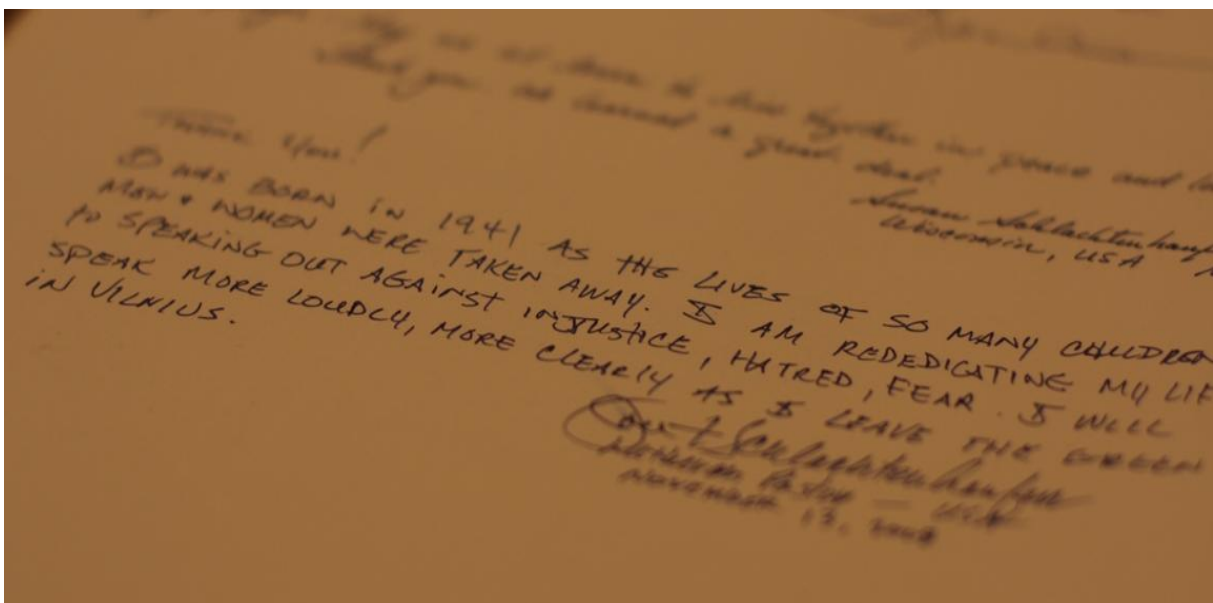


Figure 105. Comments left by a visitor to the museum.

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*, 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 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 was not 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 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 Jew as Pariah, as outsider, as restless wanderer is reversed, and there is the hope, for Rachel, that in time, the notion of 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, saviour, steward, spiritual soldier.



Figure 106. Rachel in doorway of Green House Museum.

The Creative: A Paintbox And A Collection Of Paintings



Figure 107. Dora's painting.

My introduction to Dora Pilianskiene occurred toward the end of the Katz lecture when she flickered momentarily onto the screen and walked disconcertedly about her old *shtetl*, Ziezmariiai, pointing to a ramshackle shed, then an abandoned cemetery: a woman at her end, trying to find her beginnings.



Figure 108. Dora at her home, 2008.

The person I encounter several months later, at 96, the oldest of the narrators I interview, is no longer the woman she had been just a year earlier when the video clip was shot. Having suffered a stroke, she is, by the time I meet her, confined to an armchair in the living room of the small flat she shares with her daughter Frida. From the very first words she utters when I position myself next to her – “I can’t even see you. Tears are pouring from my eyes, endless. Tears are pouring from my eyes... endlessly...” it is clear that Dora is trapped, not only physically, but also psychically in a past that weighs too heavily. In Langerian terms, her state could be described as one of “humiliated memory,” an especially intense form of uncompensating recall, wherein instead of restoring a sense

of power or control over a disabling past, the memories achieve the reverse, “reanimating the governing impotence of the worst moments” with a gnawing that neither time nor amnesia can soothe (1991: 77). That gnawing is visible in Dora's restricted movements, in her faltering speech, but especially in her eyes, which although trained directly on me, seem to see through and past me, settling on a tortured landscape elsewhere.

The French philosopher and Holocaust survivor Sarah Kofman describes how she found evidence of her father's internment and death in Auschwitz at the Serge Klarsfeld Memorial “with its endless columns of names, its lack of pathos, its sobriety, the neutrality of its information” (1998:10). The voice of this memorial, she writes, is one in which “all possibility vanished... a voice that leaves you without one, makes you doubt your common sense and all sense, makes you suffocate in silence” (1998: 39). In 1960, aged 60, Sarah Kofman committed suicide, no longer able to withstand the suffocation of her childhood trauma. In Dora's countenance a similar trauma is etched. What then remains? What is left of the person “split at the root” as the poet Adrienne Rich asks, “the one left gasping for clarity, for air” (1986: 110): stuck in the divide between a before and an after. The survivor is caught in a double bind: on one hand propelled by the need, the duty to speak and, at the same time, thwarted by the almost physical impossibility of speech, where “knotted words ... stick in your throat and cause you to lose your breath, and take away the possibility of even beginning” (Kofman 1998: 39). For Dora, given her health challenges, this circumstance is compounded even further. And yet, she has invited us into her home. She wants to speak.

Older people, in general, narrate their lives in a quest for reconciliation, for integration (Jewell 2004: 21) and to make ultimate sense of their time on earth. Survivors of trauma, in particular, strive for closure. Yet, for them, the healing of memories imposes a special challenge in that they have often been unable to absorb or register the

totality of what actually happened (Klempner 2006: 199). Given these considerations, it is not surprising that the narration Dora offers up lacks cohesion, collapsing in on itself, over and over to arrive back in her pre-war *shtetl* world— the last point in her life where she experienced a sense of sovereignty over her own fortunes.



Figure 109. Dora (front right) with her siblings, c. 1916. Source: Pilianskiene

Dora was the sixth of ten children, born in Ziezmariai in 1913 to a religious family with longstanding allegiances to the region. Her childhood experiences – “we were religious, we lived poor, we read, read, read, books, articles, anything, our happiness came from our culture and our interest in each other” – coincide with accounts offered by several major chroniclers of Litvak *shtetl* life (Eliach, Greenbaum, Katz). The day-to-day existence of Dora's father, a “very big master tailor and an expert,” can be gleaned from the portrait offered by Litvak historian Hirsz Abramowicz who describes how *shtetl* tailors would travel to neighbouring villages, sometimes for a week or more, lugging their kosher food with them, sleeping on their coats on the floor of the peasants who had hired them, working with needle and thread, through the night (Abramowicz 1999: 42).

Dora's decision to leave school early and to become a seamstress under her father's tutelage was occasioned by the family's straitened circumstances but also by her desire "to create something for the women, for the girls, according to the fashion of the times." Journals would come from Paris with all the latest fashions, she explains, "and I had this attraction and I think a talent for this, I would understand the client very well, I would figure out how to do things, what goes well with the face, and people relied on my taste." This ability to satisfy customers was, she exclaims proudly, "the happiness of my life ... and of course I earned a living. I supported my parents, my five younger brothers and sisters, I supported them all. So here was my happiness, and even though we were poor and had no profit, my biggest and most essential happiness was that I had a job, I could sew, I shared it with others."



Figure 110. Dora as a fashionable young woman.

Source: Pilianskiene

The photos taken of Dora at this time reveal a chic, attractive young woman, more at home in the pages of the Paris fashion magazines she emulated so enthusiastically than in the *shtetl*. And this, after all, was the point. "Main thing for me," she says, "was that I would be dressed in the latest fashion, so that people would notice it. And if you looked

at me, you would know that you could trust me. This was for my clients...” In the tortured expression of the woman seated in front of me lie glimpses, not only of her former beauty, of the feisty, pipe-smoking, fashionista she once was, but also of the wit, ingenuity and cunning which propelled her to safety when those around her perished.

With the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, Dora's family decided to emigrate to Uruguay. By 1932, five of her siblings had settled there. Dora's parents and a younger brother set sail to join them; she and her older brother were to travel on later. While her parents were aboard ship, the gates to Uruguay “locked” and they were returned. Thus, as she explains, “our lot became to stay in Lithuania and by some great miracle to survive the dark war and remain alive.” Soon thereafter, Dora married a young man from the *shtetl*, set up a new home with him and continued to care for her parents.

Here again, at this stage of the narrative, Dora returns to the topic of fashion, explaining that her mentor was “a great master from Paris” who taught her “step by step” to create beautiful garments. While these interjections, on first hearing, appear unrelated, extraneous, on closer listening they might be interpreted as symptomatic of disturbance and severe suffering, in which the individual revisits again and again, reliving over and over a place, a time, an experience. Trauma, Jackson explains, shatters and fragments a life, such that the habitual patterns of intersubjective connectedness “that link our lives to the lives of others, as well as to familiar objects, places, and stories are broken” (2002: 95). This loss is centred first on the loss of language. In its resistance to and its shattering of speech, trauma thus creates a deep sense of unsharability and as trauma reduces us to unbearable solitude, so our stories become reduced to contingent events. The loss of emotion, of narrative design and of moral conclusion that one witnesses in stories of traumatic experiences are signs that the individual has momentarily lost his or her sense of being connected to a world that can be recognized, chosen or known (95). It is possible

then to perceive Dora's fashion ramblings as the last evidence of who she was in a world she felt connected to, and in which she was respected, recognized and known, before she lost her *self* to trauma. Arendt observes that "who somebody is or was we can only know by knowing the story of which he is, himself, the hero" (1958: 186). That Dora clings so tenaciously to the story in which she is, herself, a hero, a woman upon whom others – clients, family, community – depend, is thus understandable. Thereafter, all paths in Dora's narrative lead to the moment in which she was "written for death." What is left are nightmare visions which hang before her eyes, day and night, and never take their leave.

The literary theorist Cathy Caruth explains that trauma can be best understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind, and that the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor (1996: 4). The story of trauma then, as a narrative of belated experience, far from telling us of an escape from reality – the escape from a death or from its referential force – rather attests to its impact on a life (7). At the core of such trauma stories is thus a kind of double telling: the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*, between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.

For Dora, this crisis of life has not abated with time but rather intensified. As she explains:

This hardship, this trouble that started on the first day of war remains in my heart to the last day of my life. I think nothing worse can be in this world than when people's lives are taken away. I will tell you the truth. I cannot laugh, I cannot laugh, just like this, simple. For example something is on television, jokes, no it doesn't affect me. I cannot rejoice. So laughter has disappeared from my life. I had a good voice and I liked to sing, if there was an event with songs, I

participated. I have many poems written down...and when I got old, I started to paint. I simply had nothing to do. I was old, I was alone. I had to do something, and this is all very close to me, and this is related to my memories...

Herein, at last, a hint of the salvific, the redemptive. In her journal, *After the Stroke*, the prolific American author, May Sarton describes how in the aftermath of her illness, although her head felt “so queer and the smallest effort, mental or physical” exhausted her, she tried nonetheless to write a few lines each day because not doing so had deprived her of ‘my *self*’ and “all that I mean about my life.” While lying in bed unable to sleep, she found herself at times overwhelmed by “all that is contained in one person, dreaming it all like a dream, and pursued by it sometimes like an inescapable nightmare.” No life, she writes, as rich as that she has lived, can ever be perfectly resolved. This can be achieved, only “in a poem or two, only through a work of art, it is too complex, too terrible, too astonishing and so the wave of memory dashes itself against the rocks” (1988: 18). While Sarton’s words relate to the challenges imposed by ill-health and depression, they are no less true for Dora. Sitting with her, I can feel those waves of memory dashing against the rocks of her well-being, her *self*. Yet how to find the form in which to express and set them free?

For the writer, the artist, the articulation of Holocaust experience has proven problematic. Wiesel has argued that the Holocaust can never be written or spoken about directly, but can only be evoked obliquely or through silence because it is impossible, he suggests, to testify from inside the Holocaust world, because the inside has no voice (1970:16). In response to the poetry of Paul Celan, Adorno wrote the now famous words “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” What is less known however, is that he later reconsidered his position, admitting that “the abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting ... that this suffering ... demands the continued existence of art even as it

prohibits it ... that it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (DeKoven-Ezrachi 1992: 260).

The art historian Ernst Van Alphen likewise stresses that the factual reconstructions typically deployed by historians tend to construct the past through recognizable and graspable plotlines which gloss over its unimaginable aspects, but that there are alternative approaches far better suited to the task. History, he says, “brings with it more responsibilities than knowing and remembering the facts, especially when that history concerns the Holocaust. Other responsibilities that are poignantly imposed on us involve the working through of the traumatic intrusion of an unimaginable reality and the foregrounding of the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told.” It is in relation to these responsibilities, he suggests, that the imaginative discourses of art and literature can step in and perform functions which, while historical, cannot be necessarily fulfilled by the historian (Gibbons 2009: 76).

The famed Vilna artist Samuel Bak would seem to have fulfilled such a function. Interned as a young boy in the Vilna Ghetto alongside Chasia and Fania, Bak was hidden in a *malina* and led to safety just prior to the ghetto’s liquidation. He has spent his lifetime since “telling stories with his brush” (Oz 2001: vii). As he explains in his memoir, *Painted in Words*, while already a successful artist in his mid-thirties, he began to question his artistic practice and realized that he had started painting because there was a past that had been lying dormant in him that needed, at last, to emerge. “This past,” he writes, “that was stirring and searching for expression made me ask myself how to let it speak” (2001: 478). Bak decided to let his story, the story of his paintings “to come without forcing.”

Mine was a story of a humanity that had survived two great wars and whose world now lay in shambles. Survivors were trying to repair the damage, to reconstruct what had been lost, to recreate something that would resemble in their eyes what was gone forever and if possible to prevent additional or future suffering. A survivor myself, I observed and understood their need to re-invent life. Their story was my story. And it was also a story about a trauma that had been silenced for far too many years. Now its emergence would be seen as a sign of resilience. These were the elements of my inner self that were asking to be communicated through my art (2001:478).

Dora's is not so much a repressed memory as one that threatens to overwhelm the very faculties of speech that might hope to articulate it. Yet the jumbled, tangled elements of her inner self find expression through her art. When finally, towards the end of our first interview, she instructs Frida to retrieve her paint box and a selection of her artwork as her biographical objects, I find in them a sense-making and re-ordering missing from her words. She, like Bak, who was responding to something that was pushing out from the inside, something that takes a long time for the mind to comprehend (480), began painting as an outlet for the horror surging within. As Frida explains: “My mother stayed home a lot, alone all the time, and all these memories come back to her and she had nobody to talk to. So all these memories she puts down on paper, she draws them out—her relatives, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, murdered...”



Figure 111. Dora is animated when she shares her paintings.



Figure 112. Dora's treasured photos, drawings and paintings.

As we lay these drawings side by side on her small coffee table and crowd around them, I see that she has, as Bak suggests, attempted to recreate something that would resemble in her eyes what was gone forever. Here in her first ever works, painted 50 years ago, we see the home she and her family inhabited, the school she once attended, a way of life now reduced to a single paragraph in the *Encyclopaedia of Jewish Life*, a 4,000-page tome on people, habits and customs of 6,500 communities wiped out during the Holocaust. The entry on Ziezmariiai merely confirms that the first Jewish settlers arrived in the region in the sixteenth century (among them no doubt, Dora's ancestors), that by 1897 the Jewish population had reached 1,628 (52% of the total inhabitants) and that with funds from abroad an orphanage, a Jewish library and a Hebrew school (the one Dora attended) were formed. In the interwar years, the entry confirms, the population dwindled as many found their way to the U.S., Palestine, and, as with Dora's family members, Uruguay (Spector 2001: 1510). Prior to the Nazi invasion in 1941, only 200 families remained, among them Dora, her younger brother, sisters and her parents.



המבשר והמבשר... (The drawing is a hand-drawn illustration of a school building, likely the school where Dora Poliparsky studied. The building is a long, single-story structure with a light-colored tiled roof and several windows. A central entrance has a small porch. In front of the building is a green lawn and a wooden fence. To the left of the fence is a large white water barrel on a stand. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with colored pencils or markers. Below the drawing, there is a caption in Hebrew and a date.)

2002 1/2 Poliparsky Dora (Kenes) 1913

Liežmariai Žasliai g-vė (mokykla)

Figure 113. Dora's drawing of her school.

On the back of several of these paintings, I later find Dora's writings in Yiddish which I send for translation. Especially poignant is her entry on the underside of her 'volkschule' drawing in which she describes how her first teacher Avraham Goldberg, "an old man with a huge beard," cultivated in her "a love for learning with all five senses," how he singled her out for her "special talents" and told her if he had the means: 'I would send you to study at my own expense.' It tells of how the opportunity to enter Uruguay was "closed down" and how: "I have sewed clothes, through the happy times and the tragic, all my life, everything belongs to the needle." The piece ends with the words "I thank God for where I am today."



Figure 114. Dora's drawing of her marital home.

In light of the turn Dora's path takes, these words read almost as an elegy of lost chances and near misses and of what we do with what is left behind. Accepting that her

lot was to remain in Lithuania, Dora set about creating a home for her new family. And there she found herself, aged 28, the day war broke out. Through the night, she listened, trembling, as bombs dropped on Ziezmariai. The following morning she awoke to “a clear thought: I have to run, run, run away from here.” She looked about her living room, at the sewing machine in the corner, at the newly acquired furnishings spotless and gleaming in the morning sunlight. Everywhere her gaze landed it was met by that which she had created “with these hands, with these fingers... it was all so neat, so clean, put in order, very beautiful.” And yet, the instinct for survival was even more pressing. “I was ready,” she tells me, “to leave everything behind. This thought, run away from here, never left me. Run away and let everything perish and be set on fire...I had earned all these things, very expensive, but already I didn’t care about them. I didn’t care. Run away, nothing else, just run away.”



Figure 115. Dora's drawing of meeting her friend in the town square.

And RUN she did, as fast as her legs could carry her, with German planes droning overhead, bombs falling in her path. “Here,” she says, pointing to a painting of Ziezmariiai town square, “you can see the centre of my township....I met my friend Rufka there, the German soldiers were all around us, I told her we have to leave now, go now... but Rufka wanted to find her sister...” When I ask the fate of her friend, Dora says simply. “This girl died.”

Yaffa Eliach describes how in the camps, inmates were robbed of all shreds of individuality, stripped of family, friends, and even their flesh, as it was eaten away by disease and starvation, and yet these “walking skeletons” their rib cages suspended from bare bones, continued to cling to their faith (1988: xxvii). For Dora too, it was her Jewish faith that she clung to as she headed towards the town square, the same words repeating themselves in her mind like a mantra— *Shema Yisroel Adenoi Elohaynu Adenoi Ehad, Shema Yisroel*, reinforcing with every step: “God is our only hope, no matter what happens... if God gives, it will happen. And I will live. I cannot otherwise. Everything I do is with God... *Shema Yisroel, Adenoi Elohaynu...*” Those words carried her across the Russian border to safety.

The fate of those she left behind is elucidated in two terse documents held today in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, dated 17th and 29th August respectively and marked *Top Secret* which read as follows:

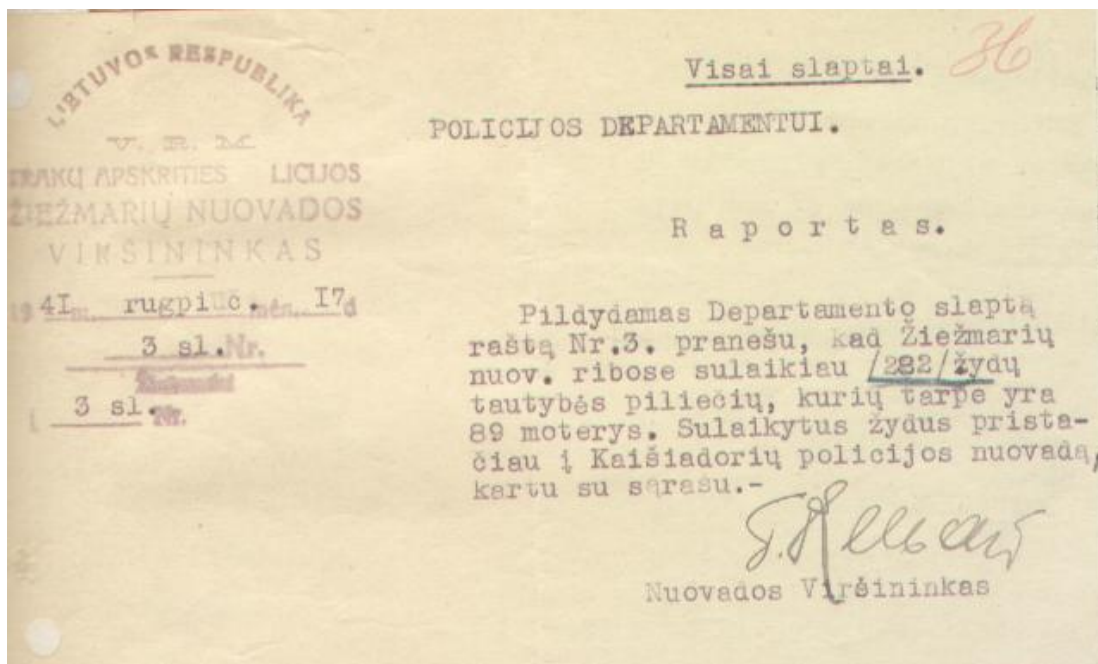


Figure 116. Police report, 17 August 1941.

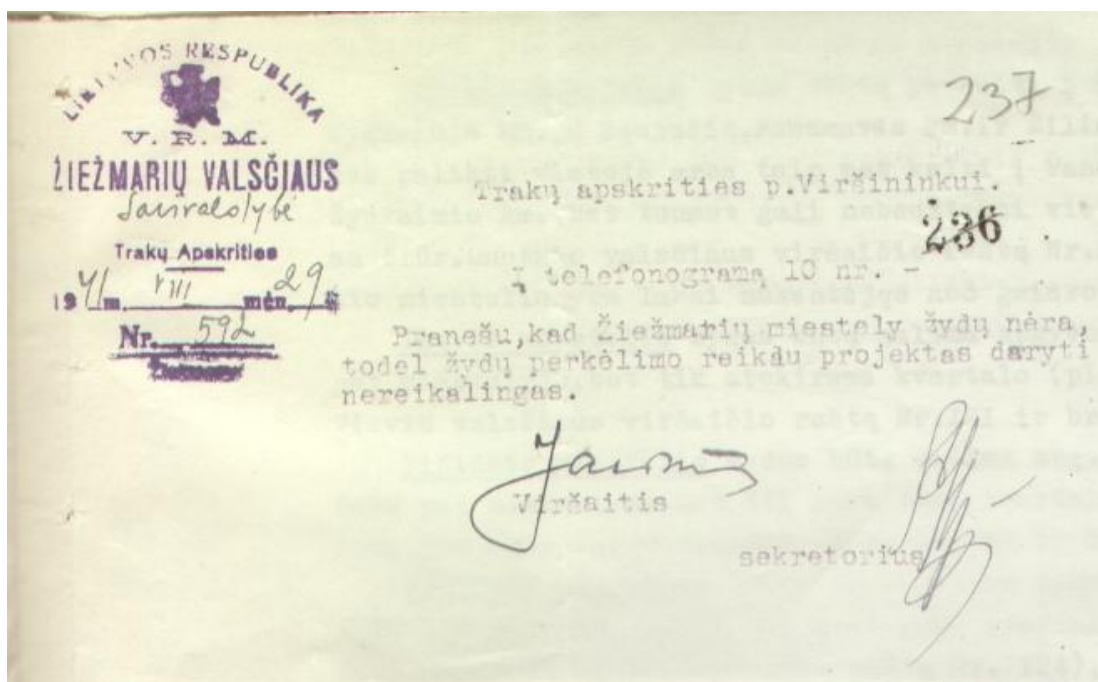


Figure 117. Head of Administration Report, 29 August 1941.

Source: Lithuanian Central State Archives

17th August, 1941 – From the Head of the Precinct to the Police Department:

Following the Department's Secret order Number 3 I inform that I arrested 282 citizens of Jewish nationality within the Ziezmarių precinct, 89 women among them. Arrested Jews together with the list, were brought to the Kaišiadorys Police Office (R-683/2/2/36: Lithuanian Central State Archives).

29th August, 1941 – From the Head of Administration to the Governor of Trakai County:

I hereby inform you that there are no Jews left in Ziezmariai township and because of that there is no need for working out a transportation project regarding resettlement of Jews (R-500/1/4/23: Lithuanian Central State Archives).

Dora's father, no doubt, was among the heads of Jewish households taken to Kaisiadorys and shot. Her mother, sisters, grandparents, nieces and all of her neighbours were surely among those rounded up on the 27th of August and murdered in the Strosinunai forest (Specter 2001: 1510). These facts became known to Dora when she returned to Lithuania after the war. They torment her still. "I am in pain," she tells me again, "I feel pain for every township, all those places so dear to me, I see everything, everything stands in my eyes, and all disappeared." It is almost as if, during the interview, these images freeze before her eyes and refuse to melt. As the hours draw on, I notice something else. She frequently interrupts my questions to ask Frida to shift a curtain, to move her chair, to pull a blind so as to shield her eyes from the sun. And though I do not recall it as a particularly bright day, the light that leaks in, nonetheless proves too powerful, too dazzling, a light from which she needs constant shading; she will not be drawn away from the darkness of her past.

Jackson calls up Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, whose mindless act of shooting an albatross brings about immediate ostracism, condemning him to absolute aloneness, "a ship stuck in an endless ocean, hallucinating silence, unbroken drought, and the nightmarish reliving of the original sin" to illuminate such conditions of intra-psychic despair (2006: 59). In Jackson's tale, I find a vivid reflection of Dora, stranded in her own

ship, cast out to sea and abandoned there by the very faculties of language, connection and conjoining that might ferry her to safety. As Caruth explains, in the event of trauma, it is not the direct experience of threat but rather the *missing* of this experience, the fact that not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known and is thus destined to endless repetition in the psyche of the individual (1996: 62). What one returns to in flashback is perhaps not the incomprehensibility of one's near death but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival (64). Dora's lingering trauma, unquestionably, relates to the terror she experienced personally at the onset of war, the bombs raining down, the abandonment of family, the sight of friends apprehended by German soldiers as she ran, the flight across the border, all arriving too unexpectedly, too suddenly to be fully absorbed and integrated into the psyche. But it is also possible that this initial trauma has, through the years, been layered over and compounded by a haunting of the imagined trauma of those she left behind, the father, the mother, the brothers, sisters, friends and neighbours who perished even as she herself fled to safety. And this opposition – the death of others, the survival of self – is etched, stroke by stroke, across her artwork.

The turmoil embedded there relates to a collective as opposed to a singular destiny, shards of the personal and the public woven inseparably together, her own recollections overwhelmed by the weight of history, coloured by the value and significance conferred upon them by others. Her paintings, in Nora's terms, constitute real-time *lieux de memoire*, repositories wherein memory crystallizes and secretes itself, supplanting the *milieux de histoire*, the actual environments of memory which themselves no longer exist (1989: 7). As representations of Dora's interiorized memories, prised away from the movement of history and shaped, just as the clothes she used to sew, with her own fingers, her paintings are ultimately “embodiments of a memorial

consciousness” (12). Benjamin suggests that for the collector, ownership over his things is the most intimate relationship he can have to objects, for it is not that they come alive in him, rather it is he who lives in them (1999: 69). For Dora, the scenes depicted in her paintings have become her memory landscape, supplanting, in effect, the actual life lived, her conjured re-imaginings of Ziezmari and those she lost there, more pronounced, more real for her than any place she has dwelled since. In the experience of sitting across from her creative works, faced with their vibrancy, their eternal aliveness, Dora suddenly finds a semblance of her own.

She spreads out the first painting she has agreed to give as her biographical object and runs her hand across it. It shows an open truck, crammed with children, their eyes startled, their mouths agape. In front of the truck stand two German soldiers, casually signalling to a man perched on the back of it who holds aloft two babies, as if they were small animals, ready to be flung into the truck bed. In the corner, there is a large keg and in the background looms a vast grey pit, behind it several tall trees. The painting is dated and signed 2008. In the lower left corner, the name Kazuk Basekizsky and the date 1941 are written.

The image is shocking in its own right- how packed the truck is, how frightened and startled the children seem, how casual and removed the soldiers. It becomes even more so as Dora's words animate it.

Children, do you see? Do you see? One of our acquaintances, a very close acquaintance told me that they brought a huge pot filled with alcohol and all these bandits would drink it. And Kazuk, this man he used to work for the Jews. And he collected all the children and threw them into the pit alive. They brought them there in a truck, like day-old cabbage, and that was the end. And after that they brought the women, and they shot the women and threw them into the same pit. So in this pit, on the bottom there are children, and on the top women. Do you understand? So the earth was moving for several days because many of them

had just been wounded and not killed. And when we came to this place after the war, we still found some shoes, pieces of clothing, scattered about.

It is not likely that Dora actually saw the earth moving for several days or that she found shoes and items of clothing scattered about the pits, as by the time she returned to Ziezmariiai, they would surely have been removed. What Dora has produced, in words and image, thus is a figurative representation, but no less valuable in the service of creating an “integrated history,” one in which historian James Young, following Friedlander, suggests the “mythic memory” of victims is granted its place within rational historiography (2000: 15). That Dora may not have been a primary witness but has instead absorbed second-hand experiences as her own is indicative of what Young refers to as “received history,” that is a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways in which they are passed down to us (15). While he coins this mainly in reference to inter-generational transmission, it is nonetheless apt as a descriptor of how even those who escaped death at the pits and returned thereafter, ‘received’ eye-witness accounts, which they subsequently co-opted as if they themselves had been present. And whether or not we can accept Dora’s testimony as history, it is *her* history. Imagining a post-Holocaust culture, Yerushalmi predicted that the image of the Holocaust would be shaped not at the historian’s anvil but rather at the novelist’s crucible (1996: 98), and this applies equally to artist survivors as the imaginative re-enactment of memory finds form in their work. However mythical, however received, without Dora’s drawings, the fate of the 200 Jewish families of Ziezmariiai, including 98 children thrown onto a truck like day-old cabbage and buried alive, remains locked in two terse official documents and one short paragraph in an Encyclopaedia of Eastern European Jewish life. As the last living former native of Ziezmariiai (Gustaitis 2006: 389), Dora is the only one left whose ‘will to remember’ (Nora 1989: 19) can conceivably transform these sites of

history – the graveyards, the massacre pits, the cemeteries – of her native *shtetl*, Ziezmaraiai into sites of memory. Without her paintings, the lives lost there remain lost.



Figure 118. Dora's drawing of Ziezmaraiai synagogue.

Holocaust-era artists, on the whole, refrained from explicit depictions of carnage, firstly out of respect for the dead, but also because given the camps' and ghettos' relentless clampdowns and regimentations, there was a limit to what they could see, know or imagine. But even with the hindsight and distance afforded the post-Holocaust artist, there has been a reluctance to grapple directly with the theme of mass atrocity (Sujo 2001: 82). And if Dora's first painting disturbs with its graphic imagery – the helplessness of the children packed into the truck, the fear on their faces, the massive pit looming behind them – it is the absence of human imagery in her second painting that is

so troubling. In it there is a small synagogue, with the Hebrew words, *Bais Midrash* (House of Learning), etched over the doorway. A blue and white Jewish flag tied by a black ribbon is attached to a post on the front wall. The door to the synagogue is bolted shut from the outside. From the windows, blood streams out and on the roof two large birds lean over and cry, their large, round tears flowing towards the ground. Even the chimney, sticking up from the roof, is filled with blood. Beside the synagogue stands a tree, from which leaves fall in great clumps, almost echoing the action of the birds' tears. In the bottom left-hand corner is written *Ziezmariiai Sinagoge*. The painting is signed and dated 7/5/2002. Dora describes it thus:

The children and the women were locked up and closed in this synagogue and it was set on fire. The synagogue was overflowing with blood and tears. Blood and tears. And who will cry for them? There is no one to cry for them. So the birds cry for them.

Dora also cries for them; she paints and she cries and in the process elevates the everyday – a battered set of watercolours, a few smeared sheets of paper, a box of old crayons – installing them within the realm of the sacred. Nora suggests that the larger web of history and memory is held together by an invisible thread, an unconscious organization of collective memories that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness (Gibbons 2009: 72). When memory is no longer everywhere, he contends, it will not be anywhere, the less it is experienced collectively the more it will require individuals to become themselves memory individuals, such that each person has the sense that his or her salvation depends on the repayment of an impossible debt (Nora 1989: 16). It was this debt that artist Katie Dell Kaufman sought to capture in fashioning Dora's memory box for our exhibition. Of her motivations in creating it, she explains:

In creating her cupboard, my inspiration is Dora at her desk with only her paints and her memories. The image in Dora's painting of the captive women and children burned to death while trapped in the synagogue, I link to another, more subtle, image of the captivity of the artist herself. Dora is here a bird, caught within the frame. Her tears well up and overflow into the watercolours in the drawer below. Below the weeping bird are the empty dovescotes, intended to evoke all the empty spaces, and the loss and longing, which is the survivor's fate. There is both loneliness and responsibility associated with being the one left behind to tell the story.



Figure 119. Dora's memory box/ Surviving History exhibition

The loneliness of being the one left behind surfaced acutely for Dora when she embarked on a psycho-geographic tour of Ziezmariiai with Dovid Katz the previous year (which resulted in the video clip in which I first saw her). Although initially eager to

show him around her beloved *shtetl*, she found the experience devastating:

My first impression was that I couldn't recognize my town. The whole town was different. Where has my town gone? Where are the old houses? Where have they disappeared to? There are no people, people disappeared. There are no signs left. So nothing remained, all signs disappeared. It is horrible, horrible. There were streets, paved with stones and now they are covered with a layer of asphalt. From the start to the end, I didn't recognise my town. Where am I, I was asking myself. This is not my town. This is not my place...no signs, no traces, everything was lost.

Yet, one year on, she is not content to just *tell* her story through words or through paintings. She wants to take me to Ziezmariiai and *show* me the valley in the Strosiunai pinewoods above which the Germans stood and fired their guns into the crowd of men huddled below in their undergarments. She wants to show me where the women and children were flung into a ditch and buried alive. But as she is too unwell to travel, she sends Frida instead as her emissary.

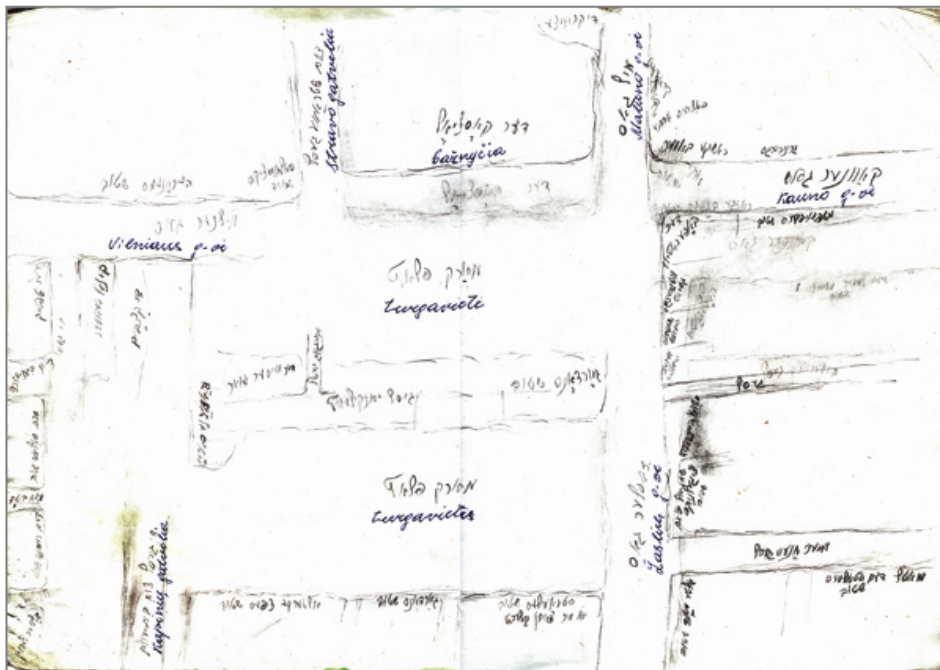


Figure 120. Dora's 'memory map.'

The following afternoon, armed with a memory map that Dora has sketched out for us, we drive to Ziezmariai. Our first stop is the town square where Frida points out the exact spot where Dora bumped into her friend, Rufka on the morning of her escape, the church steeple looming in the background just as it does in her painting.



Figure 121. Ziezmariai town square, 2008.

From there, we travel along a highway towards the mens' pit, and eventually come upon a small sign set back from the roadway, announcing the memorial. Picking our way through a dense forest, we arrive at a clearing, surrounded by railings. At its centre sits an odd-shaped stone carving, covered by a marble plaque with a citation, in both Yiddish and Lithuanian, 'commemorating the 2,200 men murdered on this spot on the 28th of August, 1941.' We stand for a few moments, reading the citation in silence.



Figure 122. Memorial at men's mass grave site.



Figure 123. Massacre site for men, Ziezmariai.

We proceed then to the women and children's mass grave nearby where we find another stone memorial, but the engraving is too faded to read. Frida explains again, as Dora had the previous afternoon, how for days, blood ran in a steady stream from the mass graves and how 'they' had found shoes and toys scattered across the ground. She points briefly to the squat hills encircling the clearing, from which the Germans and their Lithuanian shooters had fired at the women and children huddled below. She turns then toward the memorial, bends down and smooths her hand over its surface, as if caressing the faded imprint of the dead.



Figure 124. Frida reading inscription on memorial at mass grave for women and children.

Finally we reach Ziezmariiai's Jewish cemetery, an abandoned, overgrown field on the outskirts of town. It is here that Dora's ancestors lie, here where “you cannot find them because the marks, the symbols didn’t survive.” We force a path through the overgrowth for a few metres, then turn back. As we leave, Frida says sadly: “Nobody takes care of this cemetery... nobody visits anymore. The people who lay buried here are forgotten.”



Figure 125. Overgrown Jewish cemetery, Ziezmariiai.

This, like many of the places we visit, reflects the state of the Lithuanian topography, a landscape oblivious to its own past. And this is why Dora's drawings are so important. Historian Raul Hillberg stresses that the Germans "even forbade us to use the word 'corpse' or 'victim.' The dead bodies were blocks of wood, shit. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as *figuren*, that is, as puppets, as dolls or as *schmattes*, which means rags" (in Felman 1992: 210). In her artwork Dora has re-enlivened these dolls, these rags, these clumps of day-old cabbage, raising them from the ashes. It is painting then, creativity that is her *luz*, that thing inside that she holds up against erasure, that spark, that essence, the true root of her soul that will remain when all else is extinguished. For Dora, a woman described by her daughter as someone who has "nothing else to think about" but the tragedy and who is beset increasingly as she draws near to her end, by "dreams, nightmares, of how the war started, how she fled, how she was wondering around," this unextinguishable *luz*, shining through, has allowed her, in Nora's terms, to install remembrance within the realm of the sacred (1989: 9). Sacred on account of its honouring of the dead, on account of its re-instating of a slither of the collective soul, long forgotten, but sacred even more so because it has allowed her not only to remain more fully alive, but to remain alive at all.

Art is, by nature, a bodily expression. It is the body that sings, that dances, that sculpts and paints. To the extent that artistic practices have the capacity to heal, they do so by attempting to make the body whole, by integrating its shadows, rather than repressing or expelling them. Artists engage in acts of creativity, not to deny their inherent fragmentations but rather to reveal them, not to escape the chaos but rather to embrace it (Levine 2009: 117). Soul-making, suggests psychologist Stephen Levine, following Hillman, is the under-pinning of all human endeavour, and we make our souls,

by entering into their imaginal workings, by embracing and enacting our poetic imaginations. Only there can we begin to become real selves, real souls (135). And even though the Dora I meet instructs her daughter repeatedly to “cover the sun with curtains for I cannot look at people,” even though she would appear to be a woman for whom hope has disappeared, that she continues to interact, creatively, imaginatively with her history suggests otherwise. In his re-creation of the philosopher Spinoza's lost sketchbooks, writer John Berger states: “A sense of belonging to what-has-been and to the yet-to-come is what distinguishes man from other animals. Yet to face history is to face the tragic. Which is why many prefer to look away. To decide to engage oneself in history requires, even when the decision is a desperate one, hope, an earring of hope” (Berger 2011: 44). Dora's painting is, I would suggest, an act of engagement with a tragic history that she could well turn away from. Yet, she faces it, she re-creates it, clutching that earring of hope.

Weeks after my return from Vilnius, I receive a package from Dora in which I find a new painting that she has made especially for me with a brief note of explanation. In it, a group of German soldiers stand by a truck, filled with bodies, pointing their rifles towards a vast gray pit, in which several men stand with shovels. On the floor of that pit, one girl stands and two girls lie, specks of blood, deep red and purple, dotted across their bodies. On the edge of the pit, another girl, dressed only in her undergarments, jumps, almost as if launching from a diving board, into the earth below. A train of blood flows from her. In Dora's annotation, I learn that she is the daughter of the local Rabbi and that when the Germans threw her into the pit, he begged for mercy. They allowed her to crawl back out, only to shoot her as he watched. There is something that strikes me as I look at this painting again. Even though it depicts the moment in which the Rabbi's daughter was shot, she does not tumble or fall over dead into the pit; instead her black hair flows, her

body, suspended in mid-air, remains animated, alive. I like to imagine that this is Dora's soul, however briefly, floating above the devastation below.



Figure 126. Dora's last drawing, 2009.

The Creative: Two Books, A Collection Of Handwritten Notes And A Pen



Figure 127. Shoah Memorial: Lithuanian massacre sites exhibit/Surviving History exhibition



Figure 128. Josef Levinson, Veisiejai, 2008.

Josef Levinson is an intensely private man who, at 91, had never before granted an interview about his war-time experiences. When approached by Ruta on my behalf, he responded with a list of questions as to my intentions and reminded her that as an “old Communist” he might not make the best advocate for Jewish Vilna. Satisfied however, that my intentions were “honourable,” he agreed to meet.

Myerhoff’s enormous gift as a listener, her editor, Marc Kaminsky, claims, “had to do with communicating a sense of possible transcendence to others. In the steadiness of her attention, her interlocutors felt free to think and feel through dimensions of their experience that they had not owned or connected before” as a result of which she was often present “at the saying-aloud for the first time of something long lived with, subliminally” (Kaminsky 1992: 13). While I cannot claim to know why Josef elected to break his silence with me, it became clear, through the course of our interviews that he had, in fact, long been awaiting a listener.



Figure 129. Josef's living room, 2008.

His home, I noticed on first entering is atypically large, boasting a separate bedroom, living area and office space, attributable, he readily admits, to his “high ranking” in the Soviet administration. As a symbolic representation of how we take root in a “corner of the world” (Bachelard 1994: 4), a “shell of the self,” as it were (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Jalton 1981: 127), Josef’s living space, quiet and well-ordered, is suggestive of the poise, elegance and reserve, verging on stoicism, that he exhibits in person. Yet, within that imposed order, and despite his protestations to the contrary, is an emphatic evocation of Jewish life. On the cupboard sit figurines of Rabbis and Hasids, an ornate Shabbos candlestick, in the corner a Jerusalem statue and along the bookshelves, volumes of Holocaust texts and coffee-table tomes by Jewish artists.

Bachelard calls up an image of the house as a portal to metaphors of imagination, as a nest for dreaming, for creating (1994: 6). In his poetic reading of space, out of the smallest chambers – a nook, a cranny, a drawer – spin worlds within worlds. From inside a shell, a miniature dollhouse, a small casket, unfurl the “immensity of the forest, the voluptuousness of high places” (Stiligoe 1994: ix), the vastness of universes. And when

Josef leads us into his study, his most private of universes, and shows us the desk at which he has worked for the past 20 years on two very personal historical projects, I begin to grasp how a personal cosmos, through the imagination, through dreamtime, through thinking and analysing and surmising, may contain, at once, something as intimate as a silent promise, as personal as a private grief and as vast, as bottomless as the deepest massacre pits.



Figure 130. Josef's study, 2008.

It is from this desk that Josef pulls a copy of his published text *Shoah*, a sheath of original handwritten notes (relating to both *Shoah* and his previous work *The Book of Sorrows* which he cannot give me as it is now out of print), a plastic ruler and the blue Biro that he elects as his biographical objects. Notebooks, writes Edmund Wizisla in his preface to Walter Benjamin's collected archive, are "part of the fundamental equipment of writers, artists, architects, scientists, in short all intellectuals who devise things – thoughts, images – that they need to record and register... they make plain their owners' modes of thinking and working" (2007: 151). The selection of notes that follow these comments indicate Benjamin's workings, filled as they are with pages of handwritten text

– words, and sometimes entire sentences crossed out, paragraphs interrupted and continued several sections later, entries entirely covered over and transferred to other manuscripts altogether. In deciphering and analyzing these notebooks, Wizisla surmises that they represent the medium that connects author and work, the stages where thinking and writing take place. They are, he says, the quarries, the fields for experimentation on which thoughts can be gathered, structured, discarded and formed anew, ultimately holding up a mirror to the author’s face (153).

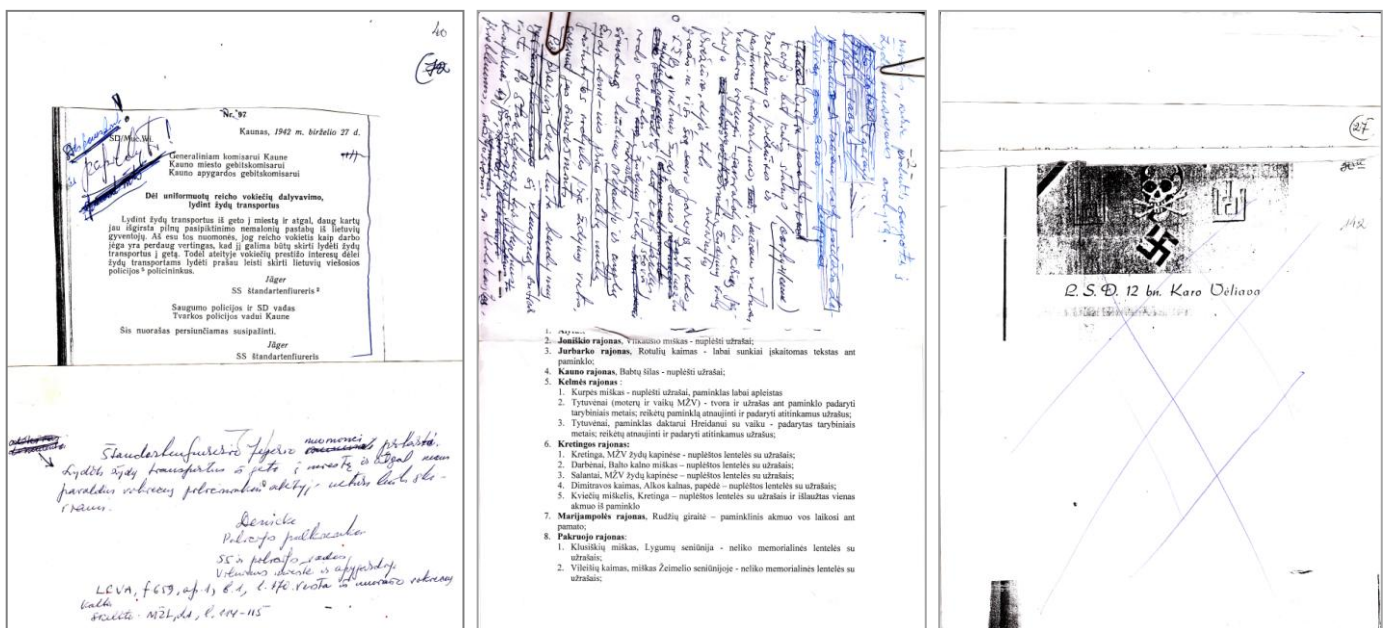


Figure 131. A collection of Josef’s handwritten notes.

Josef’s collection of notes, when grouped arbitrarily together, presents an undecipherable matrix. Among them are a series of small sheets comprised of halved and recycled A4s (on the back of typed letters) which now bear handwritten notes in blue ink, some words and sentences underlined, some crossed out. These are affixed to a larger typed sheet, on which there appears a list of place names, all of which represent massacre sites. Another grouping is made up of A4 typewritten sheets. One in particular is collage-like in form, the page comprised of several sections, cut and pasted together, such that some parts of it are layered three-deep. On the back of this sheet, tellingly, are an image

of a Swastika and a Crossbones. Each of the remaining sheets is unique in both configuration and content. One bears a copy of an SS document about the transport of Jews from Kaunas, while another seems to contain captions for photographs and is signed at the bottom, J. Levinson. This assortment represents its owner's ways of thinking and writing and crafting, connecting the author to his work, ultimately holding up a mirror to his face. What then can be discerned in that mirror?

Graphologists look to a series of pointers in their analysis of handwriting, including: pen pressure, slant, margins, spacing, size, dots, loops, speed/rhythm and so on (Olyanova 1960: 38). From Josef's sample, the following can be gleaned: its steady, medium-heavy pressure indicates a sense of vitality and engagement with the world. His 'only slight slant' points to an individual of considerable reserve, the medium-large size of his script to an expansive lens or worldview, the basic line, in his instance, steady, to an individual of even, measured temperament, prone to neither optimism nor pessimism. While the above fail to reveal anything of particular curiosity in relation to Josef's life or work, the doggedness and intensity, almost bordering on obsession, with which he has approached the tasks that these pages reflect discloses itself in the speed/rhythm of his writing. This I construe as fast, given the flow of words across the pages, as if his thoughts had gushed too rapidly, flooding across the paper, prompting repeated arranging and re-arranging, patching up and crossing out of words and sentences. In graphological terms the speed with which one writes is indicative of how much energy a person expends in their ways of thinking and acting. Josef's writing would seem to fall within the 'indistinct' pattern, that is of a person whose thoughts form so rapidly, so overwhelmingly that their written expression rushes ahead of them, forcing them to retrace their steps to fit their thinking into some kind of comprehensible pattern. His frequent use of underscoring reveals his desire for emphasis, which can, in the instance of

overuse, point to a type of fanaticism (42). Viewed as a whole, Josef's pages point to an individual grappling with swathes of information competing for limited space, a person searching incessantly for the right words with which to tell his tale, the right frame in which to place it. These pages seem to tell the story of a man, at once, ignited and disturbed, disoriented and purposeful, someone racing against time. *The Book of Sorrows*, to which many of Josef's notes refer, documents, in both text and image, the Jewish memorials erected on each of Lithuania's 200-plus known massacre sites, the result of a 10-year undertaking which Josef instigated and led. A second book *Shoah*, the outcome of a further six years spent in the archives, presents an invaluable comprehensive and unprecedented collection of documents, articles and testimonials relating to the Holocaust in Lithuania. The process which Josef undertook of locating, uncovering, renovating, marking and memorializing each of the massacre sites and of coordinating in a single volume the materials relating to the events which spawned these sites in the first place, in itself, constitutes an act of assembly: an in-gathering of souls, of bodies, dismembered and scattered, into a single unit, a unit first of memory, and then of commemoration. Historian Caroline Steedman, invoking Bachelard, talks of such practices as having to do with "longing and appropriation... with wanting things that are put together, collected, collated, named in lists and indices, a place where a whole world, a social order may be imagined..." (2001: 81). In describing the structuralist approach which he fathered, Levi-Strauss suggests that at its core "it is the quest for the invariant, or the invariant elements among superficial differences," to find what is common among them (1995: 8). And it is an attempt at re-imagining a 'whole world, a social order,' at imposing or rather unravelling patterns, that I perceive in both Josef's notes, in the ways in which they are pasted and cobbled together, and in the events which they record. There is something here too of Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur*, the collector who from the "rags and

bones” of myth, of story, of experience and material objects pulls together a life history (Doniger 1995: ix). Each memorial site is superficially different, respondent to a specific town, with a specific name, its numbers of dead. Some sites enfold those who were buried alive, others who were clubbed in the head, then thrown into a pit. Some are located in dense wood and forest, some in open fields. Yet whether the dead met their end fully clothed or half-naked, whether they looked their assailants head-on, or were taken from behind, these nuances of departure, these invariants are subsumed within the overall configuration – the mass murder of Lithuania’s Jews and the material – documents, photographs and commemorative plaques – acknowledgment of their memory. And because Josef’s pages reflect his meticulous efforts to venerate not only the dead themselves but also the physical places into which their bodies have dissolved with aesthetic memory-works, these pages point away from death and towards life. Line by painstaking line, word by tormented word, they symbolize the creative, expressive, thus life-giving, acts of someone who refused to allow the murdered to fade into anamnesis.

This disparate collection of pages, each of which corresponds in some manner to an external site or event, represents an archive or *arkheion* in the sense Derrida proposes in that, for him, there exists no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition and without a certain exteriority. “No archive without outside” (1998: 11). This ‘outside,’ as a space open to the processes of conscious action can equally constitute writings, documents, photographs, ritualized marks on the body proper (Muir 2010: 58), or as in the case of Josef, etchings on tombstones, and commemorative plaques. In the configuration of this archive – his notes and writings, as well as the two books and 200-plus memorials he coordinated – Josef is honouring an emphatically Jewish tradition, that of remembering and recounting history in the hopes of learning from it. Just as in synagogues across the globe, each year the *Torah* is read through its

entirety, just as annually on Passover the *Haggadah* is re-read, just as Jews the world over narrate and re-narrate their history in multiple forms as a reminder and an assertion that the Jewish people will never again be enslaved (Muir 2010: 58), so too Josef has answered the call to remember, to chronicle, to announce, his gaze steadfastly set toward the future. Derrida suggests that “memory is not just the opposite of forgetting... but the movement of memory as tied to the future, not only to the past, memory turned toward the promise, toward what is coming, what is arriving, what is happening tomorrow” (in Muir 2010: 58). And it was, Josef says, the heartbreaking emotions that surfaced in him in response to the *Shoah* that inspired him “to memorialize this tragedy so it would never be forgotten, so that for hundreds of years to come people could remember what happened here and could make their own conclusions about what it means to be anti-humanist and where that can lead.”

If Josef’s objects – his published texts, his notes, his pens – map the story of a people doomed to what he terms a “spiritual annihilation through oblivion” under Soviet rule (Levinson 1997: 15), they equally hold the very personal biography of a man who, in the end, found refuge from his own greatest, most intimate sorrows in the evocation of the lives and the loss of others. A man then who not only created an archive, but who found himself within it. Derrida refers to the archive as a place of shelter; art historian Peter Muir writes of the *arkheion* as an ark or temple, a site of deposition. And for Josef it is both of these. The question then: what was the journey that led him to create this archive, and who, in essence, is the man sheltered within its ark, its temple?

As established in the previous Historical Context section of this thesis, from an early age, Josef displayed the discipline which would later propel him into leadership positions in university, on the collective farms, in the army, in the Soviet administration

and finally on the national memorial project. His first primary school teacher recognized these qualities instantly. As Josef recalls:

When I was five, my father took me to school...I still remember that day so clearly... and introduced me to the teacher. And he started talking to me and as a result of the conversation the teacher decided that I should not go to first grade but straight into the second grade... and all the teaching was in Hebrew which I didn't know, but by the end of the first year my Hebrew was already perfect.. I was studying already like an old scholar.

There followed a series of scholastic advancements with Josef requesting, aged 10 to be sent to the Gymnasium in Alytos, several towns away, when his school in Veisiejai closed down. Again he remembers it “as if it was yesterday.”

I was very self-dependant because I was only ten years of age and already living on my own in Alytos. There was a room leased for me, and for the first half of the day I would attend the Gymnasium as a normal student and then in the evening I would go to my tutor's place and I would study there on my own. And I had to go through a forest to get to my tutor's house, and I remember it was autumn and there was a lot of mud through the forest...

It was this 'self-dependence' that enabled him to graduate, aged just 17, with a degree in natural sciences from Kaunas University where he had joined a group of “so-called progressive students, Communists” exorcised by the appalling worker conditions they witnessed across Lithuania, the “tragic fate” of which they sought to alleviate. After graduating with a “near perfect” grade for his thesis, Josef intended to deploy his knowledge of science and engineering to secure better quality of life for the underclasses. When the war started, however, he fled to unoccupied territory in the Soviet Union, and like Berl, found himself on a *kolkhozy* or collective farm. Acknowledged immediately for his leadership qualities, Josef was soon charged with the care of Lithuanian refugees. “I

worked there for several months,” he explains, “I was tending the crops, and I was so good at my job that I even became a candidate for chairman of the collective farm, but then I was called to the Lithuanian Division of the army and so I left for it.” Josef, again like Berl, took part in military operations with the 16th Division and his story of service equally testifies to the bloody price paid by Jewish soldiers in battle. Surviving a near fatal wound to the head, Josef returned home, like others in his unit, to a country in ruins.

Levin attests to the fury and bitterness that rose up in the hearts of Jewish veterans as they learned that most of their beloved had been murdered with the active assistance of Lithuanians. Although they could clearly differentiate between the Lithuanian murderers and their Lithuanian comrades-in-arms during the three long years of battle, it was unavoidable that a crisis of distrust arose. As a result, he surmises, a number of Jewish soldiers took spontaneous revenge on the murderers of their loved ones (2009: 6).

The revenge that Josef sought was of an entirely different nature. When I ask about his impressions on returning to Lithuania after the war, he pauses a moment:

When I was still serving in the Soviet Union, information about the fate of the Jews reached us there, and what I heard from people that had seen it terrified me. But when I re-entered Lithuania, of course, I went straight home. I wanted to know what had happened to my family, to my parents, and I spoke to people a lot and asked questions, and they were telling me stories about what had taken place. Listening to these stories, I have to say, I became frozen, really frozen, like I couldn't carry them, such terrible stories.

The weight of these stories bore down ever more heavily the day that Josef visited the massacre pits at Katkiskes, some 10 kilometres outside Veisiejai, where his father and most of his relatives and neighbours were murdered. There, standing in an open field, beside their unmarked graves, he says, “I gave a silent word to myself, a promise, that I had to do something to make this known to others, that really I, we, had to do something

so that others would know about it, so that it would never happen again.” If, as Steedman suggests, evoking Derrida, that the will to archive is born of a desire to recover, to find, to locate or possess the moments of origin, the beginnings of things (2001: 5), we can isolate that very moment when Josef, as a 24-year-old man, just returned from battle, stood in an open field, by an unmarked grave and silently uttered a promise to himself, as the inception, the instant in which his 'will to archive,' to uncover the beginnings of things so as to transfer them forward, was born.

Over the course of the next 50 years under Soviet Occupation Josef not only survived, but thrived, achieving a high-ranking position as a state-sponsored engineer, in charge of national industrial works, earning for his efforts a larger than average home and a range of privileges. He married, raised a son and a daughter and, by all accounts, lived well. Yet, during a second interview when Josef's son Aleksander joins us, I learn that notwithstanding Josef's allegiance to the party, his 'coldness' in general towards religion, the family was not spared the stigma of their Jewishness. When Aleksander, despite finishing third out of 58 students, was denied a place in the Academy of Sciences due to the rigid quota imposed on Jewish students, Josef, according to his son “used his contacts and position to get through this difficult period. It was not something,” Aleksander points out, “that we dwelled on, it was just life. And because he was in the position to do it, I entered university. Many others did not have the choice.” When Aleksander was once again denied a place at the Moscow Institute for an advanced degree in Mathematics, despite his high scores on the entrance exam, Josef contacted the director of the university who replied: “we cannot let him in because he is Jewish.” The impact of these decisions upon Aleksander was “a kind of sadness that we were pushed out for no other reason than being Jewish, but it also made me very determined to succeed.”



Figure 132. Josef and his son, Aleksander, 2008.

At this juncture in the interview, Aleksander asks me to turn off the recording device and warns me to “use the things that I have told you with caution, for we, the people behind these words, can be badly affected.” He has given the interview in English and while Josef does not speak the language, he appears uncomfortably aware of its content, interrupting Aleksander frequently with calls for prudence. As I watch this interaction, it becomes clear that although Josef describes himself as Communist rather than Jew, although Aleksander speaks of his own family as a “mixed bag,” having married a Lithuanian woman, and raised his daughter “without religion,” Jewishness remains very much at the forefront of their lives. This manifests positively, as when Aleksander says, “what I experienced made me proud to be Jewish, to know that we can go through so many hardships and yet stay Jews” and negatively because regardless of the fact that after independence “Jews were allowed to manifest their real skills, to be valued and chosen on the strengths of their merits,” today, seventy years on from the Nazi occupation and twenty-odd from the Soviet, they are still, as Jews, afraid to speak freely. When I ask Josef, if (perhaps like Fania), he had become disenchanted with Soviet ideology, he refuses to be drawn, saying only: “My answer is in my actions.”



Figure 133. Gravestones and memorial sites.

Left: Example of Jewish gravestone with customary inscription: Pay Nun and the letters Tav, Nun, Tzadee, Bet and Hay. May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. Middle and Right: Soviet plaques at Jewish massacre sites; middle: 1941, 250 Soviet citizens were killed here; right: To those Soviets killed by the German occupants. Source: Levinson, 1997

What then of those actions? Since ancient times, Jewish burial practices have required that the graves of the deceased are marked with a specifically Jewish stone or monument. These markers include: the native and Hebrew names of the deceased, the dates of birth and death, and the relationship of the individual to other family members. Typically, they also include the Hebrew letters *pay nun*, standing for “*po nikbar(ah)*, here is buried,” and the letters *tav, nun, tzadik, bet, hay*, standing for the phrase “May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life” (Binder-Kadden 1997: 35). None of these practices were adhered to under Soviet rule. As Josef states in his foreword to *The Book of Sorrows*:

The Jewish genocide did not end with their mass graves. During the following years of Soviet occupation, the Holocaust victims were doomed to spiritual annihilation through oblivion. The monuments of their mass graves indicated that these sites were the burial places of ‘Soviet people,’ or ‘civilians.’ No

mention was made of what really happened there and who the victims of the Final Solution were. (1997:15)

The Soviet treatment of the Jewish dead in Lithuania thus represented an assault not only on the deceased but also on their survivors who found themselves without a designated place in which to deposit their grief. No matter how well Josef lived, how emphatic his Communist allegiance, how negligible his commitment to Jewish ritual, the denigration, by which his fellows were denied a collective, sanctified, final resting place was something he could not disregard. It was thus that during the 50-year Soviet occupation, Josef inhabited parallel worlds: an external one of deed and action in which he experienced personal agency and in which his faith was largely muted and a private one of internal grief and memory where his Jewishness flickered, biding its time. With Lithuania's independence in the late 1980s, his disparate worlds collided; the haunting ceased, or perhaps mutated into action and the promise, unattended for half a century, finally surfaced. Describing this internal process, Josef recounts: "When I stood at the pits after the war, I promised myself I have to do something, so that these things wouldn't be forgotten, and this spirit, this mood, this emotion was with me for half a century, until the time came when we were free and able to speak about it openly."

That opportunity first presented itself in May 1990 when the newly elected independent government decreed the perpetuation of the memory of the annihilated Jewish nation through the placement of Jewish national symbols in Yiddish and Hebrew upon the sites of their mass destruction (Landsbergis 1990: 1-763: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum). A further decree called for the return of all Jewish cultural items seized before 1949 to the newly established Jewish State Museum, resulting in Rachel's Green

House (Vagnorius 1991: 1-56 Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum). With the accessibility of these materials and the opening of the former KGB archives, Josef, recently retired, entered the museum as a volunteer, charged with categorizing and classifying its holdings. At first, he explains, “day after day I would spend many, many hours in the former KGB archives and I stayed there as I had in the library of Science as a young student. I wanted to study, to learn how everything works in the archive, the procedure, but also to understand how ordinary people could commit such terrible crimes, and then I became interested in the mass graves.”

By May 1991 Josef had identified over 200 mass grave sites and with a group of “Jewish experts” formed a state-sponsored commission to carry out the work of repairing, renovating and inscribing those sites. An official document issued by the Department of Heritage Preservation and signed by members of the elected commission, including Josef, outlined specific guidelines concerning the “identification, marking and preservation of the Jewish cultural heritage of Lithuania.” This document further called for: an exhaustive inventory of identified memorial sites of the Jewish genocide, for bilingual inscriptions, in Lithuanian and either/or both Yiddish and Hebrew on mass graves, for road markers to point to remote or hidden sites, for paths to be laid leading to such sites, for upkeep and maintenance of said sites and for local municipalities to collaborate with the elected commission on carrying out the work (Zubovas 1991: 1-1661: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum).

SITES OF MASS MURDER OF LITHUANIAN JEWS



Figure 134. Map of Lithuanian massacre sites.

Source: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, Green House.

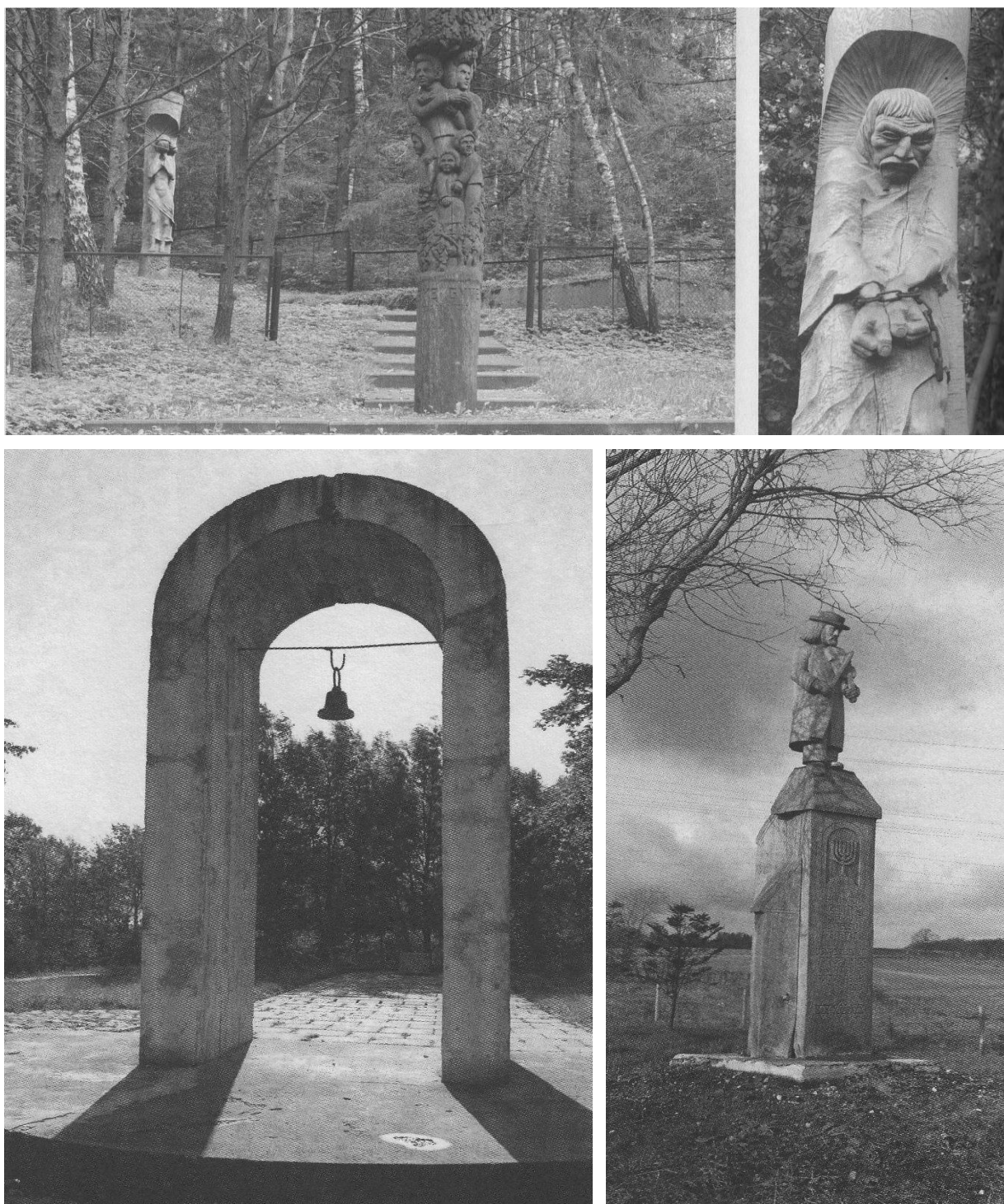


Figure 135. Memorials by artists.

Clockwise, top left and right: Memorials at Kausenai by folk artist J. Bunka; Memorial at Telsiai; The Bell of Pain at Ylakai. Source: Levinson, 1997

With his background in engineering, proven leadership qualities and knowledge of the Lithuanian landscape, Josef soon surfaced as an ideal candidate to head the renovation project. Starting in the archives where he pored over existing documents to pinpoint the exact location and numbers murdered in each site, Josef would spend the next six years travelling the country, up and down, collaborating with artists, landscapers, stone masons, builders, archaeologists and local government officials to coordinate the construction of an appropriate monument in each location. For Josef, however, the memorials were not an end unto themselves. While he was listing and “putting in order” all the massacre sites, he says:

I suddenly thought to myself, who knows what could happen tomorrow, evil is evil and evil can visit us again, and so maybe someone can come and say, no, this is not a sacred place anymore and so I decided to memorialize all these sites in a book, and while I was working on this book, I really walked not with one pair of shoes, but many, and after the book was published I received letters from all over the world, from relatives of those who were murdered in Lithuania saying that this book is eternal because the monuments can disappear, and then everything connected to it also disappears from the memory of the people, but this book will stay forever.

That resulting volume, *The Book of Sorrows*, was published in Vilnius in 1997. When I ask Josef if, after his extensive travels and research, he had felt a sense of resolution with its publication, he tells me, “Yes, absolutely. I felt that I completed work, that... how to say... these thoughts were with me for so many decades and I think this book will remain for centuries and it will remind people of what can happen when somebody behaves in an inhuman way, but in this case, 'inhuman' is a 'soft' word.”

Levi-Strauss contends that archives give a physical existence to history and Josef, in carrying the archive from its musty quarters out into the soil of his country, extended

the physicality of that archive. By then writing about the monuments conceived from the archive, his process became a circular one, through which documents were transformed into monuments and monuments back to documents again. But there is something else. In Kabbalistic teachings the concept of *Tikkun Olam*, of healing and making right the world, is best completed, it is suggested, though *chesed* – acts of kindness (on a personal level), and *tzedek* and *mishpat* – the application of justice/fairness and the law (in a more global, social context). In her review of *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* by Melissa Gabriel, Mary Grey writes:

In a further level of theological significance Gabriel shows how female activity forms part of the *tikkun olam*, or mending of the world. Using the mystical Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, she argues that the activity of women in the camps—patching, darning, bandaging and knitting—activity rich in connective metaphors—literally formed part of *tikkun*. Aware that even her numerous examples of relational activity can never assuage the depth of pain that was experienced, she still argues that in the smallest acts of kindness there can be a trace of transcendence, and that women actually set the prophetic trope in reverse, darning the canopy that is the symbol and function of covenant at the very moment of its fabric being ripped apart'. Thus, where Auschwitz almost stamped out the Divine spark, Israel could re-ignite it, by tending the body, the sanctuary of the Divine spark (2006, 124).

This spark is evident in Fania's testimony from the ghetto, but equally, in its male counterpart, it is manifest in Josef's. Through similarly healing acts of measuring, drawing, restoring, constructing, listing, 'putting on order,' he has re-inserted the sacred into the world of earthly matter, righting the wrong of spiritual annihilation through oblivion and re-inscribing the names of the dead back into the Book of Life. And here again is an embodiment of his Jewishness. When asked what that Jewishness means to him, he answers: "First and foremost, it's the human side, the humanity, the kindness, the

warmth that I feel with people and among people, this love, this understanding, this trust that you have between people, this is most valuable to me.” When pressed further as to a specific practise, tradition or historical moment of particular significance to him, Josef immediately points to *Tisha B’Av*, the date on which both the first and second temples were destroyed which, in the modern era, is regarded as a day on which to commemorate the multiple tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. For Josef, this day stands out from all other festivals and celebrations. As he explains:

I am cold to all religions, and also to the Jewish religion, but so many thousands of years have passed since this event and still this day stands out for me, and calls to my heart. When this day arrives each year I am always thinking of how the Jewish temples were destroyed and how even now, so many years after that date, the Jewish people still cannot build a normal state and cannot live under normal conditions.

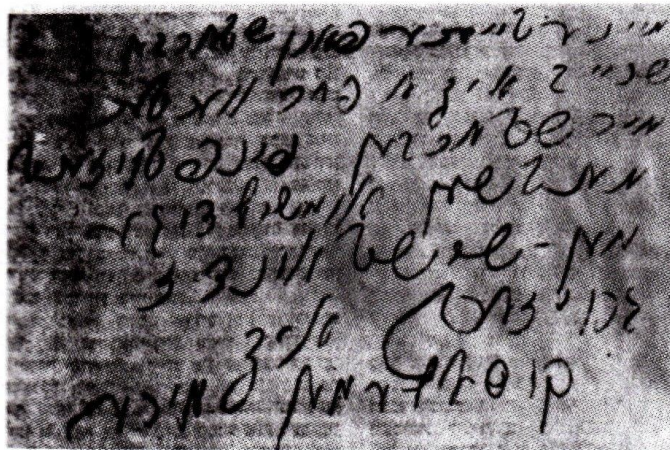
The pain that he experiences around this inability to live normal lives, under normal conditions, becomes even more acute when he speaks directly to camera and asks me to carry his message to people abroad. While he may be reluctant to openly malign the Soviet regime or to directly attack the Lithuanian government, he is nonetheless eager for his sentiments to be carried outside his home country.

I want to take this opportunity to express how difficult it is for us to understand how a government could allow a group of young Neo-Nazis to march through the streets. That they could walk through the centre of our city chanting with anti-Semitic placards is very threatening to us. In Germany today this does not happen, and here in Lithuania we do not feel safe, or protected. So I am taking this opportunity to speak to you as foreigners who really understand these issues and I want to stress that these young people who are supposed to be the flower of our society marched through our city, with the police acting only as traffic wardens so as not to interrupt the protest and the president only spoke out after

ten days, and even then it was like a father to a small child, ‘no, don’t do that, it’s not nice.’ And so, I have to speak out about this.

It was this sense of outrage that drove Josef back into the archives, an urge to ensure that the “tragic page in Lithuanian history” could be fully known (Levinson 2006: 11). Or perhaps in the process of researching the massacre sites he had become possessed of a kind of "archive fever" (Derrida 1995: 12). Whatever the impetus, 10 years after he had begun his research for the *Book of Sorrows*, Josef returned to the archives once more, this time to compile the first ever documented account of the *Shoah* in Lithuania, drawing on a vast range of material sources including: transcripts, articles, memoirs, studies, testimonials as well as an equally expansive range of respondents, among them survivors, writers, historians, witnesses, perpetrators, members of law enforcement and many others who had participated in, witnessed or researched the Holocaust in Lithuania.

For Josef, this undertaking proved far more challenging than the previous one. With *The Book of Sorrows*, photographs and images of the massacre sites constituted the bulk of the content and while the process of capturing and collating them was physically arduous, in the case of *Shoah*, he had to rely heavily on his own creativity, on his ability to first unearth and then structure into some kind of unified whole a vast range of source materials. As he explains: “I had to work with text, with people’s thoughts, with history, to go so deep into it.”



My dear ones,
I am writing a few words
before death. We are
dying – thousands of
innocent people. We are
being killed brutally.
I am Kusheleman Mire.

A note found while digging
up the graves of a mass
slaughter not far from
Rokiškis.

Facsimile.

Figure 136. Note from Rokiskis. Source: Levinson, 2006

Einsatzkommando 3		
Geheime Reichssache!		
5 Ausfertigungen		
4. Ausfertigung		
<u>Gesamtaufstellung der im Bereich des EK.3 bis zum 1. Dez. 1941 durchgeführten Exekutionen.</u>		
Übernahme der sicherheitspolizeilichen Aufgaben in Litauen durch das Einsatzkommando 3 am 2. Juli 1941.		
(Das Gebiet Wilna wurde am 9. Aug. 41, das Gebiet Schaulen am 2. Okt. 41 vom EK.3 übernommen. Wilna wurde bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt vom EK.9 und Schaulen vom EK.2 bearbeitet.)		
Auf meine Anordnung und meinen Befehl durch die lit. Partisanen durchgeführten Exekutionen:		
4.7.41 Kaunas - Fort VII - 426 Juden, 47 Jüdinnen		463
6.7.41 Kaunas - Fort VII - Juden		2 514
Nach Aufstellung eines Rollkommandos unter Führung von SS-Ostuf. Hamann und 8 - 10 bewährten Männern des EK.3 wurden nachfolgende Aktionen in Zusammenarbeit mit den lit. Partisanen durchgeführt:		
7.7.41 Mariampole	Juden	32
8.7.41 "	14 " und 5 komm. Funktionäre	19
8.7.41 Girkalines	komm. Funktionäre	6
9.7.41 Vėndžiogala	32 Juden, 2 Jüdinnen, 1 Litauerin, 2 lit. Komm., 1 russ. Kommunist	38
9.7.41 Kaunas - Fort VII - 21 Juden, 5 Jüdinnen		24
14.7.41 Mariampole	21 " , 1 russ. 9 lit. Komm.	31
17.7.41 Bakstai	8 komm. Funktionäre (6 davon Juden)	8
18.7.41 Mariampole	39 Juden, 14 Jüdinnen	53
19.7.41 Kaunas - Fort VII - 17 " , 2 " , 4 lit. Komm., 8 komm. Litauerinnen, 1 deutsche K.		26
21.7.41 Panevėžys	59 Juden, 11 Jüdinnen, 1 Litauerin, 1 Pole, 22 lit. Komm., 9 russ. Komm.	103
22.7.41 "	1 Jude	1
23.7.41 Kėdainiai	63 Juden, 12 Jüdinnen, 14 russ. Komm., 15 lit. Komm., 1 russ. O-Politruk.	125
25.7.41 Mariampole	90 Juden, 13 Jüdinnen	103
28.7.41 Panevėžys	234 " , 15 " , 19 russ. Komm., 20 lit. Kommunisten	268
-Übertrag-		3 834

Figure 137. Jäger Report.

List of numbers of Jews killed at various locations. Source: Levinson, 2006

Steedman contends that for the historian archive fever comes out at night, long after the archive has closed for the day as one lays wrestling with sleep and “the archive and its myriads of dead who all day long have pressed their concerns upon you” (2001: 17). For Josef, this proved to be the case. Over the next six years he embedded himself there – from the KGB archives to the State archives to the Science Academy. And from the fragments, the inchoate – a witness recollection, a military order, a list of names of the Sonderkommando, a personal account, an arrest record, a map, a poem, a name – from all of these he has woven together a history of the tragedy in which “a centuries-old community after participating in the battles for independence after World War I and helping to strengthen the Lithuanian state and develop the Lithuanian economy was brutally destroyed” (2006: 11). In this laying down, this ordering and naming of events he is, once again, activating the process of restoration, once again repairing the 'broken vessels' and returning the cosmos to its original, rightful state. These actions were not without impact. If, as Steedman suggests, a whole world may be inferred, imagined, transferred by the “recurrence of a name in a register, through a scrap of paper, or some other little piece of flotsam” (2001: 81), then the world that Josef absorbed during those long hours in the archives was a freighted one. From the first eye witness account in *Shoah*, where Lithuanian poet Marcelijus Martinaitis notes how, “the terrible grave pits are immediately filled in with earth under which living bodies are still moving,” to the last entry in which Josef himself invokes his native *shtetl* of Veisiejai – “the small asylum with its beautiful landscape, the smithy along the road into town...the snack-bars and tearooms, the small goods shops, the Jewish People’s Bank, the Jewish fire brigade, the library, all of these summoned so that the memory of the people whose remains now rest on the site of mass murder at Katkiskes could live on in my words at least” – Josef offers up phrase by phrase, the names, the stories, the places, so as to perpetuate and sanctify

them. “ All of my emotions,”he says, “all of my feelings went into this work. I spent nights, reading, compiling, putting them into one piece, and I am not ashamed to say, that reading through all these documents, I cried, and not just once.”



Figure 138. Photo of Rosa Liov Levinson at Josef’s home.

In the spirit of *Tikkun Olam*, it is advocated that acts of kindness should, wherever possible, affect *our* inner beings as well as the world at large (Dorff 2005: 17). Over the course of our interviews, I have noticed on the otherwise bare wall, a single photo of a women, the frame bordered by a simple black band. I assume that it is Josef’s wife, but as he does not refer to it, I do not ask. During our last meeting, as he describes how he sat through the night, poring over documents from the archives, his voice grows deeper, sadder and suddenly he points briefly to the photo and murmurs the words: “my wife, Rosa.”

“Writing this book,” he tells me then, “was a very difficult time for me, because at that time my wife died. I felt so lonely, you know, so I put all my emotion, all my sadness

into this work, and ... often I would stay awake, sometimes right through the night with these documents, and they were like companions for me.” It is to Rosa Liov, his “life companion,” his father, Abrom Levinson and his mother Masha Kagan Levinson that *Shoah* is dedicated. Josef’s creativity and its by-products are thus, I believe, what have held and absorbed his grief, in the absence of his mother, his father, his wife. And the process has been reciprocal: without Josef’s ‘will to remember,’ his acts of gathering, constructing, collating, shaping, preparing, presenting, publishing, the archives, the landscapes are as dead pages of a burnt-out history. And without the work of retrieving them, Josef is perhaps a man beleaguered by grief, undone by loss. Through these acts of recovery, Josef has found for his most private sorrow a receptacle, but he has also, in reclaiming and repossessing the lost archives, reconstituted a history and authored a landscape. Social scientist David Harvey, argues that certain intuitions lead individuals to “mould space to convey a message” (Samuels 1979: 65) and if we can discern the biography of a landscape by examining what individuals have to say about themselves and their contexts (65), we can perceive the Lithuanian landscape, dotted as it is externally by 200-plus memorials and internally by the ongoing struggle to accommodate its thwarted past, as an extension of the “cosmos,” the “house” (Bachelard 1994: 4) that Josef inhabits, the personal “*arkheion*” where his daydreams, his imaginations take hold and from whose “poetic depths” (Steedman 2001 : 120) he has construed a landscape of eternal memory. And it is to the external site that marks the inception of this memory work, to his native *shtetl* of Veisiejai, that Josef invites us as his special place.

Veisiejai is a two-hour drive from Vilnius and although the interview has tired him, Josef is a man of renewed vigour as he pulls on a jacket and scarf and leads the way out of his apartment to the van below. When we arrive in Veisiejai he instructs the driver to take us to the laneway where his grandfather’s brewery once stood. He alights and

stands a few moments, facing the river, breathing in the air, the smells, the sights that daily greeted him as a young boy. The brewery, he explains, was dismantled by the Soviets, its bricks and pipes distributed among the locals for the construction of their homes. From there, Josef leads us to the town square where he pauses beside a statue on the very spot where his father, his cousins, friends and neighbours were gathered before being marched to the massacre pits at Katkiskes, a few kilometres away. From the square, we walk toward the river's edge where we encounter a large wooden structure, painted bright green, the former synagogue, Josef tells us, and beside it, a smaller building which once housed the *Mikveh* (ritual bath). Steedman suggests that in the twentieth century, time has slowed down, compressed itself into the “interior spaces of remembered things” such that nothing ever goes away (2001: 79). Echoing this, in the final chapter of *Shoah*, Josef writes: “As I walk along the streets of Veisiejai now, every house reminds me of somebody: my dear father, my relatives, friends, acquaintances, neighbours and native people. The same houses are standing just like in the old days, but as if after the explosion of a particular kind of neutron bomb...” (2006: 499).



Figure 139. Josef speaking to the family which now inhabits the former Hoffman home.

On our way back to the van we pass a small dwelling. The front door is wide open. Two young boys lounge lazily on the stoop. “The Hoffmans,” Josef says quietly, “I can still see them standing on that stoop, that was their home.” The woman of the house emerges, a strange fire in her eyes. Josef asks if she remembers who the previous owners were, and suddenly her tiny birdlike frame contorts. She begins shouting: “The Jews are a cursed people, a terrible people, they have done horrible things, they deserve to be killed, otherwise they will take over and run us all out of the country.” Eventually her husband appears and explains to Josef that she is afraid that he is a 'Hoffman' who has come to reclaim his home. We walk back toward the van in silence.



Figure 140. Massacre site at Katkiskes, 2008.

We drive for several kilometres towards Katkiskes, eventually arriving at a turn-off with a sign indicating the memorial. Partway up a beaten track, atop a small hill we

find an enclosure, a stone monument placed at its centre. Over many hours in our company, Josef has maintained his poise, no matter how painful the subject matter. It is only when he stands again before this memorial and reads its inscription aloud in Yiddish – *1535 Jewish men, women and children murdered here by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators* – and invokes by name his father, his cousins, his friends, that a sadness so deep rises up in him, that his voice wavers, tears well in his eyes and his face crumbles in grief. In the video clip that captures these moments, which I review much later, I see myself next to him. Although I am looking away, his sentiment is so visceral, so charged that it almost visibly transmits across the space between us. After a long silence, it is my tears that begin to fall rather than his, as if I am holding for him a sorrow too great to bear alone.

The sun is already setting by the time we make our way to the van. On the drive back to Vilnius, Josef settles into the seat beside me, quiet, reflective. When, after a few minutes, I inquire how he spends his days now, he answers simply: “I live with my past.” Then we fall again into a long silence. As night begins to descend, we rush past fields and forests and towns, past memorials, and pits and railways. I drift in and out of sleep, exhausted by the day’s events. Every time I open my eyes, the same image greets me: a man, dignified, upright, squashed into a van between strangers, his eyes wide open, unwavering, trained always on the road ahead. This is how one lives with one’s past.

Living with the Past

Historian Irena Vesaite suggests that tolerance cannot be “one-sided.” As a child, saved from certain death by her “second mother,” Stefanija Ladigiene, an ethnic Lithuanian, she identifies today as both Lithuanian and Jewish. While the country, in her view, has not yet come to terms with its painful legacy, there have been significant shifts that should be acknowledged, most importantly, she asserts, the acceptance on the part of politicians and academia that the Holocaust constitutes one of the “the most tragic pages of Lithuanian history.” In the four years since this research process began, some practical changes have occurred: In September 2008, the case against Yitzhak Arad was formally closed (Operation: Last Chance 2008). In August 2009, the Lithuanian government reached an agreement with Jewish organizations granting Snipiskes cemetery protected status, with the proviso that buildings already in place could remain but that no new buildings would be constructed (Mullet 2009). In 2010, the Green House Museum was renovated with technical upgrading of a number of exhibits and the addition of video screens and other facilities.

In April 2012, the Lithuanian government finally approved a fund of \$50 million dollars for the restitution of Jewish property, to be distributed over the next ten years to the Foundation for Jewish Heritage. A further \$1 million has been earmarked specifically to assist needy Holocaust survivors (JTA 2012).

In July 2012, the Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius met with members of the Lithuanian Jewish Community to discuss issues relating to: restitution, improving educational programs to teach school-age children more about the Holocaust and Jewish contributions to culture, economics, art and literature. At the meeting, Kubilius stated his

intention to: “devote a lot of attention so that the Jewish community’s, and all of Lithuania’s tragedy, the Holocaust and the shameful participation of Lithuanians in it, will be taught openly and appropriately in Lithuanian schools. It is crucial, he stressed, to bring back to our historical inheritance how strong the Jewish community in Lithuania was until the Holocaust, what a vast cultural heritage it is, one which we want to know about and in which we want to take pride” (Jewish Community of Lithuania 2012).

Vesaite contends that in terms of Lithuanian-Jewish relations, damage has been inflicted by both sides: on the Lithuanian side by negative media campaigns, Holocaust denial and the ongoing diminishing of Jewish suffering; on the Jewish side by the constant “blaming of Lithuanians by some Jewish activists who see Lithuanian duplicity and insincerity in everything.” The building of bridges, she asserts, requires recognition of “positive effort” (Bernardinai 2011). After the meeting with Kubilius, Dr. Simon Alperovich, the Chairman of the Jewish Community of Lithuania and a survivor, expressed his confidence in the Prime Minister and stressed that “their opinions on a large number of Jewish issues coincided” (Jewish Community of Lithuania 2012). While this interaction suggests the kind of bridge-building that Vesaite calls for and the long-awaited restitution program is finally underway, an incongruence, between expressed intentions and actual events, nonetheless continues. Evidence of this can be perceived in: the government's reluctance to formally close the cases against Fania Brantovsky and Rachel Margolis; the signing of the Prague Declaration in 2008, endorsing a theory of double genocide, equating the suffering experienced as a result of both the Nazi and Communist regimes; the 2010 Klaipedia court ruling, allowing the public display of Swastikas as symbols of 'Lithuania's historical heritage'; the 2012 National march which attracted a 1000-strong crowd of supporters; and the recent posthumous award of the state's highest honour – the Grand Cross of the Order of Vytautas the Great– to, and

reburial, amid much fanfare, of Juozas Brazaitis (Ambrazevičius), head of the country's provisional 1941 pro-Nazi government (Baltic News Services 2012).

In light of the above, one cannot escape the impression, writes Soviet historian Robert van Voren, that in comparison to neighbouring countries, Lithuania remains in a state of denial and repressed aggression in which “blaming the Jews continues to dominate the debate.” On the one hand, he asserts, the historically (proven) incorrect image of the Jews “having brought Soviet rule upon the nation continues to be repeated and, on the other hand, Jews are time and again blamed for monopolizing the image of victim that Lithuanians like to claim for themselves.” The scope of the killings, the brutality of the perpetrators, the cruelty and indifference of the majority of the people who preferred to look the other way, these facts, van Voren asserts, are known to most, but have been subsumed under a swathe of primitive explanations. Fantasies of an anti-Lithuanian conspiracy and of Jewish political power continue to haunt the Lithuanian nation, as a result of which a “muteness has descended on the country, broken only by sudden outbursts of national indignation when 'again' Lithuanians are accused of active participation” (2011: 181). In order to assess the past in a balanced, thorough manner, the new generation of Lithuanians must, writes van Voren, be provided with all the available information, and yet the tendency among some to “cover up and mould the truth to what they think are Lithuania's national needs” prevails. The moral responsibility of a country, its citizens and its authorities to reveal “the true story in all its complexities and to pass it on to future generations in the hope that they will learn from it” cannot be, in the case of Lithuania, excused away by fifty years of communism (182). The stories, the experiences presented here form part of that 'true story,' the part that has been overshadowed, excised or silenced.

Hinton stresses the need for historians to discover new and appropriate ways of integrating the study of the subjectivities of ordinary people into the history of social and cultural change, arguing that the time is ripe for attention to be paid to “the moment in which individuals make their own history” (2011: 205). Social historian E. P. Thompson similarly grasps the necessity of trying to understand people in light of their own experiences and their reactions to those experiences (Burke 2001: 27). In stringing together a multiplicity of voices, this research offers up a view of history as a collective enterprise, one in which a community comes to life through the individuals who inhabit it (Kassow 2007:145). Yet the specific research context which this thesis seeks to address – where the majority who might speak of the past have been eradicated and the few who remain near their ends, where their archives and monuments have been sundered from their grasp, their land and buildings destroyed or re-appropriated, their memories and experiences overwhelmed by a competitive martyrology – calls for a distinctive and innovative research intervention beyond the gathering of voices. In assessing Creates' artistic installations, as highlighted in the methodology section of this thesis, Cole and Knowles point to the unique perspective her work offers on her Newfoundland kin and their land, a perspective, they assert, that would not have surfaced through traditional oral and text-based life history work alone. Her approach, they surmise, allowed for a more thorough contextualization of the life lived, while also giving space for her own intuitive responses to her subjects (2001: 59). Similarly, the approaches adopted here offer deeper, more layered understandings of the narrators and their worlds than might have been achieved through traditional oral history methods. While this thesis makes a timely contribution to the current academic preoccupation with Lithuania's Jewish past, evidenced by a series of recent conferences (Jews and-non Jews in Lithuania: Coexistence, Cooperation, Violence” UCL), texts (*We Are Still Here: Memories of the*

Lithuanian Holocaust, Ellen Cassedy 2012, *The Last Bright Days: A Young Woman's Life in a Lithuanian Shtetl on the Eve of the Holocaust*, 2012, *Expulsion and Extermination: Holocaust Testimonials from Provincial Lithuania* by David Bankier 2012) and various films on the topic, it departs from research undertaken by others in the scope of its interdisciplinarity and, in particular, in its focus on a spiritual, primarily Hasidic, dimension. In Jewish tradition, a *genizah* denotes the space, usually a room or attic, where observant Jews placed damaged holy books with the name of God written upon them until they could be buried properly in the cemetery. In a similar vein to An-sky who “created his own ethnographic *genizah* of Eastern European Jewish folk traditions” thus ensuring their survival (Deutsch 2011: 12), this thesis and the accompanying exhibition and film seek to achieve *oyfleben* – the Yiddish term meaning 'to revive' in the sense of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's theory of heritage, whereby traditions are afforded a second life through their expression, exhibition or performance (Deutsch 2011: 36). Invoking Proust, Kirshenblatt- Gimblett writes that the past “is hidden...beyond the reach of the intellect- in some material objects” (1989: 330). For Arendt, Kirshenblatt- Gimblett further explains, the factual world of human affairs depended for its reality and its continued existence, “first upon the presence of others who have seen and will remember, and second on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things” (1989:27). These notions about the importance of materiality find a counterpart in Hasidic teachings of worship, or finding meaning through corporeality. And while the Hasidic framework in which this research sits is certainly not new, its application within an historical research context is. Here, the material, the spatial render the personal, the intimate, the abstract more visceral, more embodied, more alive. Here, the spiritual underlays each aspect of the material output that the research has generated. And the methods utilized are widely transferable to other research contexts, in particular, those of individuals cut off

from their pasts, those in exile or flight, whose lands, homes, families, memories and words have been broken by circumstance. In these contexts, the loved object, the special place, their unique sacred sparks ignited as they are gathered and represented anew, conjure worlds, prompt memories and ignite the sacred spark in those with whom they come into contact. In this they fulfil the redemptive function An-sky ascribed to ethnography: for him it was not enough to merely collect 'representative' examples of songs, tales or amulets. It was, he believed, only through the collection and elevation of each song, each dance, each word, each artefact, through their representation in new cultural contexts – an exhibition, a theatrical performance, a new text – that the redemptive could be achieved (Deutsch 2011: 43)

The preceding chapters – The Mourner, The Memory Bearers, The Creatives – seek to elevate the material and in the process to capture those moments in which the individuals, who are at the centre of this research, have made their own histories and shaped the histories of others, even within a social, cultural and political reality designed to eradicate them. As they now approach their final days, against a backdrop populated still by the visual imagery and material remnants – the Swastikas, the marches, the slogans, the Honour Guards and Grand Crosses – of their painful pasts, what now for these individuals?

In January 2012, Dora suffered a second stroke. She no longer paints and communicates with Frida only about “what to eat, what to drink.” Berl no longer makes his twice-daily pilgrimage to the synagogue, and has for the past year been confined to his bed. A carer sits with him day and night. Chasia no longer visits the Jewish Community Centre because she is too weak and fearful about leaving her disabled son Velvel alone. Josef's son Aleksander has moved into his father's flat to care for him. Josef

still sits behind his desk each day, and writes and reads and “puts in order” new material from the archives. Rachel continues her work at the Green House as best she can given her age and the fact that “the political situation is such that the discussion about the sharp corners of the Holocaust are not welcome in this country.” She keeps in touch with friends around the world at Yad Vashem, USHMM and is, at present, writing a review of Holocaust education materials. Fania recently celebrated her 90th Birthday at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute surrounded by friends and colleagues and continues her work as Head Librarian and also as Deputy Head of the Association of the former ghetto and concentration camp prisoners at the Lithuanian Jewish Community Centre. She is, she says, “very happy to reach my 90th year.”

As I think now of Berl lying in his bed, mouthing his prayers, of Josef making his painstaking way to his desk each morning, of Rachel climbing the steep incline to the Green House, all of them, each in their own way, impacting, affecting a corner of the world, I know that the *luz* that has sustained them – the paintings, the memorials, the books, the mausoleum, the service of others – will remain long after their bodies have been consigned to the earth.

On the outskirts of the village of Nemaksciai, far off the main road, hidden from view lies Vidukles Stotis, the mass grave which Berl spoke of in his interview, where his father and 200 others were buried. Some years ago, local authorities finally tore down the warehouse that was constructed on top of the graves. Today, instead there are flowers planted there. Locals say that a woman comes each week to clear the grave and to tend to the flowers. Nobody knows her name.

This is how one lives with one's past.....

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- R-159/3/1/30 Bragdonas, P. (1944). Eyewitness Account, Siauliai.

R-683/2/2/36	Kaisiadory (1941) Report on arrest of Jews in Ziezmariai region.
R-500/1/4/237	Trakai (1941) Report on eradication of Jews in Ziezmariai region.

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1-763	Landsbergis, V. 1990. Document concerning the Preservation of Graves of Jewish Genocide Victims and their status as Heritage Sites
1- 56	Vagnorius, G. 1991. Document concerning the return to the Jewish State Museum all items in its possession prior to 1949.
1-166	Zubovas, V. (1991). Document concerning the appropriate identification, marking and preservation of the Jewish cultural heritage in Lithuania.

Oral History Interviews

Fania Brantsovsky	12, 13, 16 September 2008, 15 November 2008
Gita Geseleva	7 September 2008
Berl Glazer	1, 10 September 2008
Vilius Kavaliauskas	19 September 2008
Rachel Kostanian	12 September 2008, 14, 16 November 2008
Josef Levinson	6, 18 September 2008
Aleksander Levinson	18 September 2008
Dora Pilianskiene	5, 11 September 2008
Frida Pilianskiene	5, 6, 11 September 2008
Chasia Spanerflig	8 June 2008, 1, 15 September 2008
Irena Vesaite	22 January 2009

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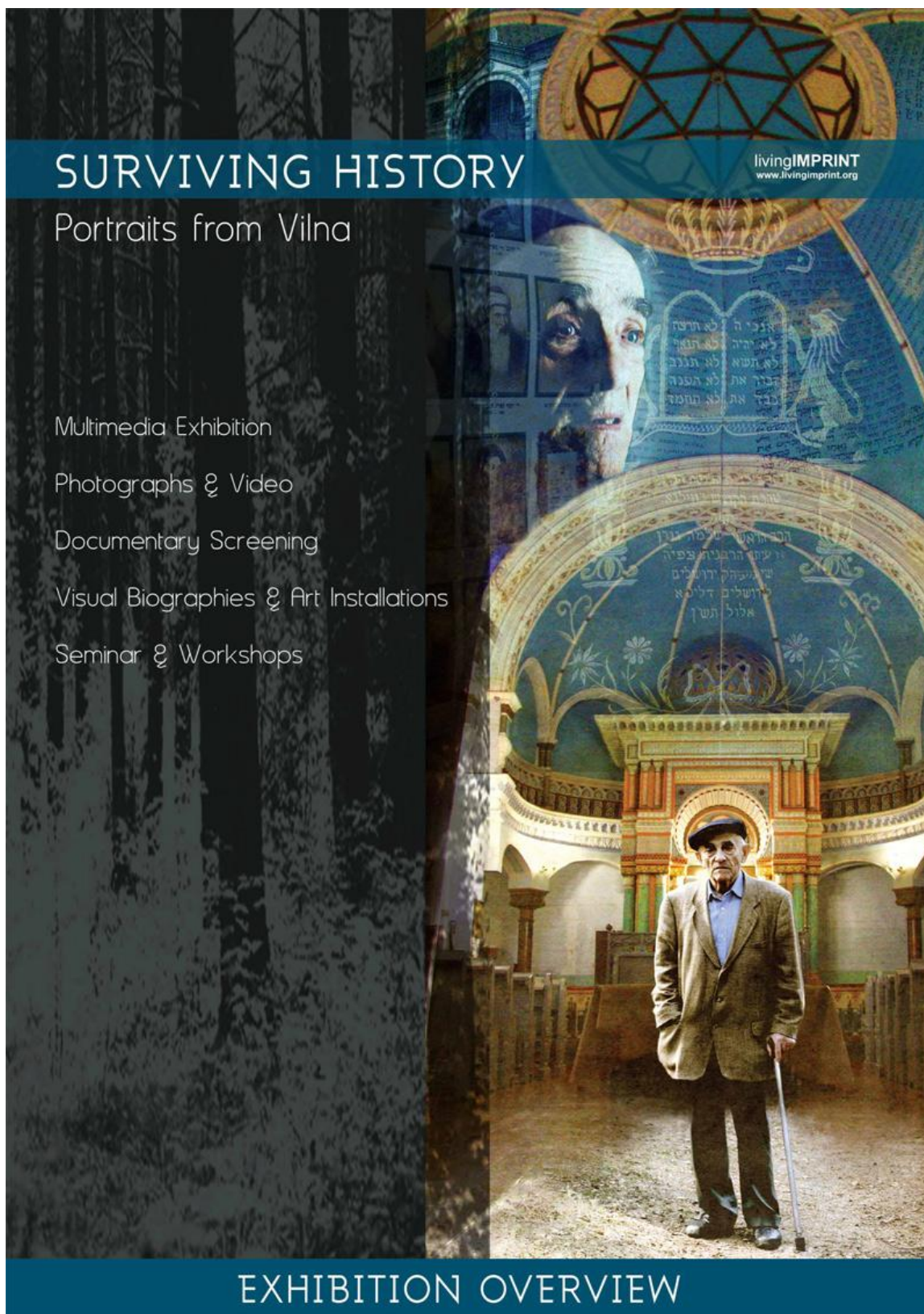
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Appendix 1: Surviving History Exhibition Overview

A composite graphic for the 'Surviving History' exhibition. The background is a collage. On the left, a dark, textured image of a forest. On the right, a photograph of an elderly man in a brown jacket and cap, leaning on a cane, standing in a synagogue with ornate arches and Hebrew inscriptions on the walls. Overlaid on the right side is a large, semi-transparent portrait of an elderly man with a white beard and a crown, with Hebrew text floating around him. A dark blue horizontal band across the top contains the title and logo. A dark blue horizontal band at the bottom contains the subtitle.

SURVIVING HISTORY

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Portraits from Vilna

Multimedia Exhibition
Photographs & Video
Documentary Screening
Visual Biographies & Art Installations
Seminar & Workshops

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The Exhibition – In Brief

Surviving History: Portraits From Vilna

presents the life stories of 10 individuals who survived the Holocaust in Lithuania where ninety-five percent of the 240,000-strong pre-war Jewish population was annihilated. The routes of escape were narrow; those who survived did so because they joined the partisans or the army, or escaped to Russia. Or because kind strangers hid them in basements and attics and on farms, because they slipped unnoticed through a hole in the ghetto gate, or somehow lasted in the camps until liberation. All of those interviewed lost family members to the Holocaust.

This exhibition explores the points of intersection where the personal and the collective collide. Drawing on an interdisciplinary range of media: photography, video, text, archival documentation, visual biography and biographical objects, it seeks to

express how history is lived from the inside. Glimpses of the personal – a tiny bottle of perfume tucked into a pocket before fleeing the ghetto, a silent promise made beside a mass grave, shoes made from parachute material – typically absent from the historical record, are afforded prominence here.

We travelled to Lithuania to discover what remained of its once thriving Jewish presence. We found a city alive and teeming with memory, where every single thing – a powder case, a silver spoon, a photograph, a chess piece, a flower, a stone—speaks. As in the work of Yiddish poet, Peretz Miransky, ‘everything has its melody’ and its meaning. It is with the intention of honouring the melody, the essence of these individuals and their inimitable life experiences that we stage this exhibition.



“Thanks for reminding us to not forget.”
– P. Hannigan

Photo Exhibition

A selection of 45 photos serve as an introduction to the Jewish presence in Lithuania and the 10 narrators – in their homes, with their biographical objects, and in the places they brought us to, such as former shtetls, the cemetery, or mass graves. These are presented on 3 portable modular display systems measuring 2.6mW x 2.0mH.



The Vilna Diaries

This is a selection of 9 video clips pre-prepared and edited for presentation on a continuous loop using a solid state media player. The clips have been carefully chosen and edited to present a glimpse into the personal worlds of the 10 narrators, each varying between 1.5 to 3 minutes long. This exhibit comprises a 32-inch plasma screen and a modular counter of 900mmH x 400mmW x 700mmL.





Visual Biography Installations

This consists of 10 composite 'wallpapers' which represent the narrator's external worlds. Affixed to each of these is a 'memory cupboard' which represents the narrator's internal world and memories. These have been created by a collective of artists from the US and the UK – Birgit Muller, Dwora Fried, Katie Dell Kaufman, Lynsey Cleaver and Mike Moran. These are presented using a hinged folding display kit 600mmW x 1.8mH as backdrop, and the 'memory cupboards' are showcased on a display plinth.



Visual Biography Installations

The 'memory cupboards' offer a glimpse into the narrators' interior world. Biographical objects represented within these 'cupboards' are explained in the narrators' own words, from transcript excerpts, and its interpretation through artists' statements.







Shoah Memorial Installation

This creative installation provides a wider context in which to situate the personal histories of the narrators by commemorating the 200+ massacre sites in Lithuania. A 'forest' of light boxes surrounds the focal point of this installation – a map of Lithuania – accompanied by 228 bottles, labeled with the names of the sites and filled with beads to varying levels representing the number of lives lost at each location. Visitors are encouraged to explore and reflect on the immensity of this tragedy by handling these bottles.

The two-sided surfaces of the lightboxes are inscribed with the names of the massacre sites on one side and on the reverse, photo images of trees at Ponar, the largest mass killing site, and excerpts from eyewitness accounts and archival documents. A separate display plinth contains actual objects collected from the various killing sites, synagogue and cemeteries: candles, stones, and earth.

'Surviving History' Documentary

This 28-minute artistic documentary traces the journey of the researcher, Shivaun Woolfson. It begins with a poignant reflection on her findings at Ponar, the largest mass killing site in Lithuania. The audience is then transported into the living rooms of seven narrators, introduced to their stories, their memories and their current worlds. They are then led on a journey to the cemeteries, to the last remaining synagogue on Pylimo Street, and to the memorial sites

commemorating those who perished in the Lithuanian Shoah. This documentary explores the complex and layered history of the Jewish experience in Lithuania including issues of local complicity and collaboration, and recent anti-Semitic activity. This documentary is distributed by Journeyman Pictures and has won several awards, including the Audience Poll Award at the Imperial War Museum Film Festivals.



To watch Surviving History documentary on the History Channel, please go to <http://www.history.co.uk/features/surviving-history/about.html>

Associated Events To Date

- 9 Feb 2009 – Association of Jewish Refugees, UK
- 25 March 2009 – University of Manchester, UK
- 29 March 2009 – Day Limmud, Brighton & Hove Council, UK
- 27-30 May 2009 – University College Dublin; partners Humanities Institute of Ireland, Holocaust Educational Trust of Ireland
- 2-5 June 2009 – London Jewish Cultural Centre, London, UK
- 9 June 2009 – Spiro Ark, Central London, UK
- 16 June 2009 – University of Sussex, UK, partners: Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research and Centre for German-Jewish Studies
- 10 Sept – 9 Oct 2009 – Tolerance Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania; partners: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, International Historical Commission, Vilnius Yiddish Institute, British Embassy Vilnius, Irish Embassy
- 11 Sept – 12 Sept 2009 – Teachers Seminar, Vilnius, Lithuania; partners: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, International Historical Commission, Vilnius Yiddish Institute
- 25-29 Jan 2010 – Shirehall, Shropshire Council, Shrewsbury
- 12-29 April 2010 – Cape Town Holocaust Centre; exhibition, Teachers Training Workshop, Annual University of Stellenbosch Faculty of Education Workshop
- 5-17 May 2010 – Rabbi Cyril Harris Centre, Johannesburg
- 25 May – 6 June 2010 – Durban Holocaust Centre
- 21-26 June 2010 – Central Synagogue, London
- 25-28 Jan 2011 – Biddenham International School, Bedford; sponsors: Bedford Borough & Central Bedfordshire Borough Councils & SACREs, The RE Society of Bedfordshire, The Diocese of St Albans



Some Comments

"Powerful, moving and immensely eloquent." – R. MacSweeney

"Heartbreaking." – A. Fay

"Thank you for being the voice of many and for helping many to share their story." – Father C. Crossey

"Thanks for reminding us to not forget." – P. Hannigan

"Resilience and the human spirit in its rawest form!" – R. Marron

"Powerful, thoughtful, beautiful and terrifying." – I. Hill

"You manage to capture the moment of reckoning of an individual, which is rare and moving." – G. Rollstone

"These memories should not be lost." – M. Moran

"Moving and very inspirational." – R. Noble

"Such important work, so moving, beautifully conceived and presented." – M. Creates

"Moving stories that must be told, remembered and heard. Thank you." – N. McCormack

"An inspirational and deeply moving film." – M. Kinnon

"Powerful content and beautifully made film." – M. Moore

"Unbearable to watch." – F. McCafferty

"What man does to man – tragic." – M. Kelly

"The afternoon at the LJCC was so moving and thoughtful. Thank you and all those involved." – F. Davies

"I attended both evenings in Dublin and just want to say that I was very impressed by the film and talks." – E. Wuelfing

"It was lovely to share yesterday the talks, documentary and exhibition. The talks complement each other: a survivor and active member of Vilnius Jewish community; a Lithuanian researcher and Shivaun, project director." – S. Muniz





Appendix 2: Narrators' Biographical Data

Berl Glazer

DOB: 1924

Origin: Nemaksciai, Lithuania

Occupation: Retired (Prev. taxi driver)

Status: Widower

Chasia Spanerflig (Langbort-Fridman)

DOB: 1921

Origin: Zdentel, Poland

Occupation: Retired (Volunteer - The Union of the Second WW Veterans,
Jewish Community Centre)

Status: Widow, one son, one daughter

Dora Pilianskiene

DOB: 1913

Origin: Zemaitija, Lithuania

Occupation: Retired (Seamstress)

Status: Widow, one daughter

Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky

DOB: 1922

Origin: Kaunas, Lithuania

Occupation: Deputy Chairperson, Union of Concentration Camp and Ghetto
Survivors; Librarian - Vilnius Yiddish Institute

Status: Widow, two daughters

Josef Levinson

DOB: 1917

Origin: Veisiejai, Lithuania

Occupation: Retired engineer

Status: Widower, one son, one daughter

Rachel Kostanian

DOB: 1929

Origin: Siauliai, Lithuania

Occupation: Director, Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum (The Green House)

Status: Married, one son