



September 1997

Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania

Newsletter

*Dear Friends,
dear Colleagues!*

The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum is happy to present to you its first newsletter. First of all we want to **greet you with Rosh Hashana** and wish you a happy and fruitful year!

For those who have not visited our museum yet we would like to present some history about the museum: The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum was reopened in 1989 and started from scratch after the destruction perpetrated by the Nazis. In the Soviet times the Jewish theme was not in the curriculum of schools, institutes or positively reflected in mass media. Therefore the museum aims to maintain the history of the Jews in Lithuania, to narrate its uniqueness, to tell the tragic story of the Holocaust and to shape the memory and consciousness of society as well as that of visitors coming from abroad. Since its inception the museum has established a large collection of documents, prepared and published nine books and established quite a number of permanent and temporary exhibitions - all as a result of research done by the museum's staff.

The museum welcomes approximately 12,000 visitors a year, providing them guided tours. The museum's staff has given consultations, interviews and information to local and foreign researchers and media journalists. Several films about the museum have been produced by Lithuanian, English, German, Austrian and Russian television companies. Also many articles have been written about it. The museum participates in many aspects of Jewish life and also performs work not normally associated with museum activities: work at sites of mass murder of Jews in Lithuania, at old Jewish cemeteries and on the history of synagogues of Lithuania. With its activities the museum has contributed to the battle of justice and democracy against racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia. (*excerpts from a booklet about the museum; compiled by R. Kostanian*)

The State of Lithuania is experiencing a difficult economic situation, and though it provides very modest salaries for the staff it is not able to support most of the projects of the Jewish museum. We have therefore established a group of "Friends of the Jewish Museum of Lithuania". Sir Martin Gilbert has become one of our patrons. We invite you to become our friend or to confirm your friendship through an annual subscription of US-\$ 50 or DM 75 sent by cheque to the museum. (Any larger amount would of course be very welcome and allow us to expand our work.) Only through your contribution can our work continue. We thank you for your understanding and support.

Latest Events in the Museum

Spiritual Resistance

(Vilnius Ghetto Poster Exhibition: April-December 1997)

In April 1997 the Jewish Community of Lithuania commemorated the 55th anniversary of the opening of the Vilnius Ghetto Theatre.

History:

There were approximately 240 000 Jews in Lithuania on the eve of the Second World War. About 200 000 of them have been viciously murdered by the Nazis and their local helpers in the woods, synagogues and graveyards of Lithuania. Simultaneously, Jews were isolated and herded into ghettos where they were subject to annihilation, humiliation and vicious violence. They tried to resist, to fight back with any possible means. The younger generation formed armed partisan organisations (which we shall

tell about in another newsletter, as this one is dedicated to spiritual resistance). Others fought back spiritually by keeping their dignity, their ages old cultural tradition of the Litvaks - Lithuanian Jews. Hungry and humiliated, often after „actions“ of extermination, they united in art, literature, education, medical, social and other associations to keep up human and cultural way of life in what was once „Jerushalayim de Lite“. After a long day of slave labour they would come to listen to a lecture, to a concert (there was a wonderful symphony-orchestra under Wolf Durmushkin), to a performance, to a performance, satire, choirs, etc.. Children attended schools (approximately 2700 in 1941), organised and cleaned by the teachers in the Ghetto. They were educated in the spirit of Jewish national dignity, they were taught to love and have pride in their nation's history, to believe in its future.

The doctors created a system of hygiene and fought with filth against contagious diseases. They established bath houses with disinfecting chambers, laundries, hygiene control and tea rooms. Scientists wrote and discussed their papers. (from an article by E. Biber and R. Kostanian)

All these and other various activities are reflected in posters exposed in an exhibition created by the museum. The exhibition aroused great interest. Various institutions in Israel and have asked to host it. A recent visitor from the USA, Mrs. Lorna M. Strassler, generously contributed to the preservation of these 55 years old original and fragile posters. The opening of the exhibition was attended by many dignitaries: the Ambassador of Israel to the Baltic States, Mr. Ben-Gur, high officials from the ministry of culture of Israel, Lithuania and other countries. Also diplomats, scientists, representatives of the Jewish Community of Lithuania and many others were present. Among them the Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol and the film-producer Claude Lanzmann.



Film producer Claude Lanzmann ("Shoah") and Scientific Secretary Rachel Kostanian, April 1997

Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol ("Ghetto") and his countymen artist Ram Katzir at the opening of the exhibition "Spiritual Resistance", April 1997



"I am incredibly moved by this visit to the Jewish Museum of Vilnius (Vilna). Here I find many documents and photographs with which I worked while preparing Shoah. Also many names. Each time the despair and the horror comes back equally strong with the same force, even if one knows most of the episodes. Anyway, one never knows all! We'll never be consoled."

*Vilnius, the 11 of April 1997
Claude Lanzmann*

Yiddishist Prof. David Katz from Oxford University, April 1997



Jacques Lipchitz Gallery

Our exhibition in Druskininkai was opened in 1996 in honour of the famous Jewish sculptor Jacques Lipchitz who grew up in this town. The exhibition is divided into several sections. One part consists of photographs about the artistic work of the sculptor.

In another room original drawings of Esther Lurije (a survivor of the Kaunas Ghetto) are exposed. Furthermore, the museum contains a collection of photographs documenting the relation and contacts between the pope and Jewry.

This year new collections have been added to the exhibitions; a series of pictures by Michael Percov, a local artist, most of them with a link to Lithuania's former Litvak culture; original posters announcing various exhibitions of Jacques Lipchitz works.

Vilna Gaon - Synagogues of Lithuania



In September this year the Jewish State Museum opened a new exhibition "Synagogues of Lithuania", which it dedicated to the Great Vilna Gaon - Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720 - 1797). So well known is his name that 200 years after his death the entire Jewish world is commemorating this great occasion.

The Gaon was the greatest luminary not only among the many Talmudic scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries (and of five centuries before that), but for many generations to come. His unsurpassed intellectuality and spirituality gave him an unchallenged supremacy as an exponent of the Torah and the Talmud, to the study of which he devoted his whole life.

The exhibition "Synagogues of Lithuania" is the result of a big project. It was opened in the course of the Gaon festivals and deals with Lithuanian synagogues which have escaped destruction during the war as well as with the most important of pre-war Lithuania which are now destroyed. History, plans, photos and other aspects of these synagogues are the content of this exhibition. The exhibition is the modest input of the museum commemorating the Great Vilna Gaon.

(excerpts from the exhibition catalogue)

This commemoration attracted great attention, participation as well as opposition from world Jewry. Nevertheless, the whole event was a great success.

Projects of the Museum

Publishing:

1. Vilnius Ghetto: List of Prisoners Vol. 2. (the names of the lists in vol. 1 in alphabetical order, as well as lists of Jews of some labour camps around Vilnius.)
2. Diauliai Ghetto: Lists of Prisoners (compiled at the same time).
3. Bibliography "Jews in the Mirror of Lithuanian Press 1985 - 1995".
4. The Holocaust in Lithuania in Documents.
5. Valley of Sorrows (places of mass murder of Jews in Lithuania).
6. The Righteous among the Nations. In six parts

Touring exhibitions:

Very soon we hope to have two or three touring exhibitions:

1. The Righteous in Lithuania.
2. The Synagogues of Lithuania.
3. Posters from the Vilnius Ghetto (about various activities in the ghetto: lectures, performances, music, etc.)

Any contribution for our projects would help very much. Here we want to extend many thanks to our latest sponsors whose donations will contribute greatly to the implement of these projects: the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, the US Embassy to Lithuania, the Anti-Defamation League, the Barrington Foundation, H. Kessler and Mr. and Mrs. Margol.

We also want to express our greatest gratitude to our friends who sent us very important books: Ges. für christl.-jüd. Zusammenarbeit in Europa, Prof. D. Levin, M. Toledano (Israel), S. Rabinovici, M. Greenbaum, Sir S. Hamburger, I. Marcus, J. Foutita, H. Kessler, L. Tiefer, Pinner and Northwood group.

Other Permanent Exhibitions

The Green House

The museum has established a permanent exhibition "Catastrophe", dedicated to the Holocaust in Lithuania. The images, explanations, original documents and objects give the visitor an under-standing of the cruel reality of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

It illustrates the history of Lithuanian Jewry up to World War II, the terrible years of Nazi-occupation and how the genocide took place in Lithuania. The fact that all this has not been talked about under Soviet rule had consequences on nowadays attitude toward the Jewish population in Lithuania`s society.



The Green House

The Memorial of Ponar

This memorial which was inaugurated already under the Soviets, calls for remembering the sufferings of the Jewish people.

In about ten trenches the Nazis and their local helpers shot approximately 100,000 people, among them about 70,000 Jews. The small genocide museum illustrates the crimes committed in this place 55 years ago and exhibits objects found in the pits. Several memorials in Ponar commemorate the helplessly murdered people.

Vilnius - The Tarbut School

A variety of exhibitions can be visited in the building of the former "Tarbut school": "Memorials & Jewish Grave-yards in Lithuania", "Gallery of the Righteous", where the heroic bravery and humanity of just gentiles is commemorated. Furthermore the ethnographic "Judaica collection" shows old Jewish objects, telling about Jewish religious life. The exhibition is dedicated to the memory of the Great Vilnius Synagogue and exposes three original objects from it. Original dolls for "Purimspiel" are on display in a separate room.



The content of the newsletter was advised by R. Kostanian. Layout: M. Ebenhoch and J. Thaler (two volunteers from Austria)

New Books Published by the Jewish Museum

*SELECTION OF DOCUMENTS ON JEWISH HERITAGE
AND PROBLEMS
28 pp; English
ISBN: 9986-18-016-3*

This Book was compiled by E. Zingeris.

*THE JEWISH STATE MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA
52 pp, with photographs in colour, English,
US\$ 12, ISBN: 9986-9019-3-6*

This booklet illustrates the history of the contemporary Jewish museum, its exhibitions, the history behind them and the museum's unique activities in a town once named "Jerusalem of Lithuania". author: R. Kostanian

*THE DAYS OF MEMORY
550 pp, English, Lithuanian & Russian,
US\$ 20, ISBN: 0086-403-40-5*

The book contains the papers of an international conference, held in Vilnius in 1993. Documentation about the rich Lithuanian Jewish culture, and the tragic fate during WW2. For the first time Lithuanian-Jewish relations have been discussed. chief editor: M. Zingeris

THE JEWISH MUSEUM

*360 pp with photographs, Lithuanian & Russian
(English summaries), US\$ 25, ISBN: 9986-9019-1-X*

This almanac contains articles, essays, archive documents and memoirs about the rich history of Lithuanian Jewry. Unfortunately a major part of the Jewish life in Lithuania belongs to the past. To record history, retrieve invaluable archive materials and try to write down the reminiscences of those who survived the tempests of this violent century, are the main goals of the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania. chief editor: E. Tzeitlin; editor: I. Guzenberg

*VILNIUS GHETTO: LISTS OF PRISONERS, VOL. 1
430 pp with photographs, English, Lithuanian
and Russian, US\$ 20, ISBN 9986-9019-2-8*

It is the first publication of the lists of the Vilna ghetto inmates. They were recently discovered by the Jewish museum researchers in the Lithuania Central State Archives. The lists were compiled during the general population census of Lithuania in May 1942. The book also includes scientific articles and commentaries written by Jewish historians and archival workers, as well as rare photographic material on Jewish Vilna. Compiled by I. Guzenberg