



VILNA GAON JEWISH STATE MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA

NEWSLETTER SPECIAL EDITION

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10 Years of "Gedenkdienst" Activity in Lithuania

THANKS
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- Organization Gedenkdienst, www.gedenkdienst.at
- The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, www.jmuseum.lt
- Vilnius Yiddish Institute, www.judacvilnius.com
- Zukunftsfonds der Republik Österreich, www.zukunftsfonds-oesterreich.at

**COMMEMORATION OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMS:
10 YEARS OF GEDENKDIENST
ACTIVITY IN LITHUANIA**

ONE DAY SYMPOSIUM
13 September 2006
11 a.m. - 18 p.m.

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Symposium

On the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of Austrian volunteers working here at the Jewish Museum a Symposium and a reunion was organized by our directorate and volunteer Stefan Pierer, together with Dr. Vilma Gradinskaite, our secretary of research and the incredible help of the Austrian Ambassador, Sir Michael Schwarzinger.

Since the foundation of Gedenkdienst in 1992 until now (from 1995 – 96) 10 volunteers from Austria have worked 14 months each in the Jewish State Museum in Vilnius, instead of joining the Austrian army.



Fania Brantsovsky, Ambassador Michael Schwarzinger, Volunteers, Gregor Ribarov, Markas Zingeris, Norbert Hinterleitner and Rachel Kostanian

The symposium took place on 13th September, but all the former Volunteers stayed in Vilnius until the 17th.



Volunteers and other guests

The Symposium, which ran under the name "10 years of Gedenkdienst in Lithuania – Commemoration of the Holocaust victims", was held at the museum's Tolerance Centre and started early in the morning with a guided tour through the latest exhibition on the top floor. Our director, Mr. Markas Zingeris opened the event with a short speech and warm greetings and thanks to organisers and supporters.



Speeches

Altogether 7 speeches were held; we shall just quote a fraction of them:

Speech: Rachel Kostanian Vice Director of the Jewish Museum

Dear guests from Austria, Sir Ambassador Schwarzinger, dear Gedenkdienst, sons of our museum family, dear colleagues from the museum and the Jewish Community, from the Yiddish Institute and other known state institutions.

First of all I want to thank the parents and families of our volunteers, of Johannes Thaler and Wolf Freinbichler, Florian Förster and Sepp Brudermann, Alex Gruber, Philipp Herzog, Felix Prectl, Johannes Langer, Stefan Pierer and today our new volunteer Michael Kieber.

I want to thank also your school teachers as well as those who contributed to bring up such modest, educated and cultured, absolutely dedicated and highly tolerant young people.

You substituted not only one, but often two employees.

It was not only your painstaking every day work, but also your wish to contribute, to expand our work by new ideas. It was among you, that not only Johannes Thaler, our second "boy", but also our first volunteer Markus Ebenhoch, and of course Norbert Hinterleitner raised the idea of bringing Anne Frank's exhibition from Amsterdam to Lithuania.



Markas Zingeris and Egidijus Aleksandravicius

We did not know how to present the idea of the enormity of the evil of the Holocaust here, to the society, which in the middle of the 90s, not speaking of 1991-1995, showed no willingness to discuss the issue. Local schools, not speaking of regular gentiles, visited us quite rarely.

This exhibition was, I dare to say, our common step in the whole issue of overcoming this barrier. The Anne Frank Exhibition embodied an inconspicuous battle for the truth you stood shoulder to shoulder with us. And hence with all others involved in this battle.



And our Ruta Puisyute, the seven years Constanta among you, with you, helping you, supporting you in common enthusiasm. As well as Norbert Hinterleitner from Amsterdam, quite often coming and supporting us with concrete steps and a smile.

*The exhibition travelled over 8 to 10 main cities of Lithuania and had an audience of over 10.000 visitors.
It brought our message "Never again".*

Many events have been created and organised alongside with the Anne Frank exhibition: the best of them was the play "Anne Frank", which the beautiful young lady from London, Henrietta Seebom, staged with the participation of Lithuanian and Jewish students. May be such cooperation happened for the first time in Lithuania after 1941. I remember how happy and screaming Norbert and Flo were, when "Ann Frank" has been performed in the former Vilna Ghetto theatre; the audience had been moved to tears.

If not the work of Johannes Thaler and Wolfhardt Freinbichler that project would not have been fulfilled so successfully. It seems that everyone was permeated by a feeling of commonness, tenderness and good will.

Flo went out with Ruta with the exhibition to schools all over Lithuania. Seminars and hot discussions followed. That contributed to research and interest in the theme in the wider society.



Judith Lewonig and Volunteers listening to the speeches

It was always an idea, a project, which united us, in particular you all there, on the second floor in our Green House. Our museum became one of the places where people from all over the world would come to find out their roots, their families' stories, to listen to the echoes of the lost world, to stand the edges of the pits...

In the museum a new European mentality was elaborated – a mentality of tolerance, of sharing common values of the civilized world – if I may use this term today.

Austrian, Lithuanian, Jewish and Russian cultures and mentalities melted here, I'd say in a new form, where everyone learns from each other, teaches each other just via its own example.

We were directing, or teaching you, guiding and prompting, and you would teach us, with your own example, at least some of us.

I want to mention some more projects, besides everyday routine work, proposed and actively implemented by you. Our first volunteer, Markus Ebenhoch, proposed and delivered a lecture on the Kristallnacht in the public library on Traku street, in 1996(!), made a trip to Yad Vashem and brought lots of material for us and contemplations for himself.

You assisted us in the Vilnius Ghetto posters exhibition, in creating pamphlets, in creating and designing our Newsletters – you were picking up the texts, you did the lay-outs.



Wolf, you did the first flyers, which are up to today at disposal of every visitor. Sepp, you did the Nr 5, you went with Ruta for your own project about the perception of historical events in Lithuania among elderly survivors. You filmed, you interviewed. It was your time of development of ideas and implementing them.

"This year changed my life absolutely" – you said, now in 2006 meeting, and the same was voiced by the majority of you. Thank you dear!



John Evers and Sepp, alongside with Wolf and Museum employees

The idea of establishing an exhibition about "Jewish life in Lithuania" was brought up by Norbert Hinterleitner (Anne Frank House). Ruta was not only the main curator, but also the heart and driving force behind it, and you, guys, were always at help. You would help to assemble it, to do any technical work and to follow Ruta with it to every place for presentation.

It travelled a lot, has a wonderful catalogue, and two films – by Sepp Brudermann and Niko Mayer.

My book, „Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto" was translated by Felix Prechtl into German.

Philipp Herzog brought up and implemented the idea of making T-shirts and post cards, based on objects from our archives. We will never forget your music and dishes you shared with us, Philipp.

And our newest educational project – implemented by Johannes Langer, who, prepared a whole lecture on "Tolerance, anti-Semitism and Holocaust", being 19. He visited 13 schools.

Also Stefan Pierer followed this practise and hold lectures at 31 schools, also being 19.

Vilma, Galina, Zoya, Dahlia, Zhenia – is our team behind the work.

All that, and I spoke only of a small part of your great work (for details look at our Newsletters and webpage) you took part in and the work of the whole museum's staff, impacted the process of restoration of the historical truth.

Thank you.



Summary: Hannah Lessing “Austria confronting her past” Secretary General of the National Fund and the General Settlement Fund in Austria

The first part of the speech deals with Austria facing her role during World War II and her attempts to face responsibility for persecution perpetrated during the National Socialist regime as well as her attitude towards reparation. The “Victim’s Theory” based on the Moscow Declaration will be mentioned as well as Dr. Kurt Waldheim’s statement at the presidential election campaign 1986 and Dr. Franz Vranitzky talking about “collective guilt”, which waked a new political era of confrontation with the past. Questions like the meaning of restitution or monetary compensation are being elaborated.

There is a special focus on the steps undertaken over the last decade in the search for historical truth and compensation – especially the work of the National Fund, his attempt to officially acknowledge victims of National Socialism and build a bridge to them. The tasks of the National Fund like the payment of a symbolic lump-sum or supporting projects are mentioned. Furthermore the Washington Agreement and the comprised measures, like immediate compensation for survivors and the establishment of the General Settlement Fund, are a topic.

Summary: Gregor Ribarov “Perceptions beyond the final stroke” Chairman of the Austrian Organization Gedenkdienst

In the lecture, the initial situation in Austria concerning dealing with the Holocaust and changes in this initial situation is coped with. Today, Gedenkdienst is far away from its beginnings as an organization of “radical Nestbeschmutzer” (unpatriotic, disloyal and ungrateful people) as the whole society’s understanding of the topic changed. So-called “Holocaust Education” is very common today in Austria (i.e. the project “Letter to the Stars”) and the organization Gedenkdienst is on the very first glance far away from any socio-political avant-garde.



Gregor Ribarov during his lecture

But on a closer glance, one recognizes a certain superficial aspect in these - lately to general consensus developed - “educative efforts”. To those educative efforts, engagement as a Gedenkdienstler (Austrian volunteer) is in a certain contrast, as this Holocaust memorial service is a more effective/lasting confrontation with history – not to replace with short moments of occupation with history, over which the immense point of morals is to be seen as some kind of sword of Damocles. The uniqueness of this form of engagement will be shown on the example of 10 Austrian volunteers who went to Vilnius. The cooperation with the museum will illustrate this. Afterwards problems of the Holocaust memorial service and not sufficient support from Austria (finances, no possibility for service for women) will be pointed out as well.



Ruta Puisyte and Volunteers discussing at the round table

All in all 7 lectures, each about 30 minutes, were held, plus the round table discussions with all the former and present volunteers, which ended the Symposium at about 6.p.m.

After the Symposium the lecturers, volunteers, museum employees as well as guests have been invited to the only kosher restaurant in Vilnius, to Kineret to enjoy dinner.



Kosher Wine at Kineret Restaurant



Norbert and Sepp, Hotel Conti



Gedenkdienstler from the last 10 years

By Rachel Kostanian



Markus Ebenhoch | 1996/1997: Was the first volunteer to come to Lithuania. He started a successful cooperation between the Jewish Museum and UNITED, the European network against racism and Anti-Semitism. He realised a theatre project named "Ghetto" from Joshua Sobol and did some preparations for exhibition-cooperation with Museums in Essen, Vienna, Amsterdam and Warsaw.

Johannes Thaler | 1997/1998 : Johannes helped to organise a lot of exhibitions (Jacques Lipchitz, Joyce Rohmoser, Anne Frank) and also participated with the organisation of the *Chaim-Soutin* - Conference.



Wolfhardt Freinbichler | 1998/1999, his main project was the implementation of the exhibition "Anne Frank - a History for Today". He was the first to create our flyer "The Jewish State Museum of Lithuania", wrote the texts, did the design.

Florian Förster | 1999/2000, helped a lot with the Anne Frank exhibition, travelled to cities with Ruta, participated in organising the drama Anne Frank, and all discussions.





Sepp Bruderemann | 2000/2001 – Participated in a drama project, teaching tolerance. He worked on the design of the exhibition “Jewish life in Lithuania”, its content. Together with his colleague, Niko Mayr from Amsterdam, he filmed this project and made an educational video “Opening up”. Another film produced by Sepp and Niko is called “Surviving Ostland” – a movie about the destiny of 5 women during the holocaust. This was a dedicated painstaking work. The exhibition travelled to many places in Lithuania and abroad. Today it is part of our Tolerance Centre main exhibition “The lost world”.



Alex Gruber | 2001/2002 – contributed a lot to the exhibition “Jewish Life in Lithuania”, its catalogue and worked on editing the book “Spiritual resistance in the Vilnius Ghetto”.

Philipp Herzog | 2002/2003 – brought up the idea of producing T-shirts and post cards and produced them for the museum. These cards are still sold in the museum.



Felix Prechtl | 2003/2004 - Helped a lot working on the exhibition “Jewish Life in Lithuania” and also translated the book about spiritual resistance into German.



Johannes Langer | 2004/2005 - started the educational project; visited 13 schools all over Lithuania to held lectures about anti-Semitism, tolerance and Holocaust.



Stefan Pierer | 2005/2006 – continued the lecture-project and visited over 30 schools. He, together with great help of Dr. Vilma Gradinskaite, organised a symposium on the occasion of the 10 year anniversary of volunteers from Austria.

Meeting in the Green House

Apart from the Symposium the museums employees met the Gedenkdienster in the Green House, were we had dinner together and talked about the past and the presence.



Ruta and Neringa



Jury, Wolfhardt, Rachel



Trip to Stasiunai Village



Vilma and Ruta

On the next day a fishing trip to Stasiunai village was organized. In this beautiful rural area everyone had plenty of time for discussions, conversation and sitting together sharing memories.



Wolfhardt and Felix



Felix, Stasiunai Village

The whole event filled everyone with warmth and contributed to common awareness that the mutual efforts were not in vain.