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Middle-aged and older members of our society spent their youth under the Communist regime. We lived without freedom of speech, and not merely were we not allowed to travel freely, but our choice of career was made for us. Imagination, thinking and the arts were hostages to censorship. The post-Stalinist regime was marked by harm done to common morale and culture: hypocrisy, intolerance, command-control, indifference and even enmity towards cultural heritage and traditions. All of this was covered up with noble-sounding yet empty words on culture— “national in form yet socialist in content”—on democracy, on universal equality and national progress.

When I attempted to submit some of my poetry, a poem about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of which I was particularly proud, to *Sovetish Heymland*, a Yiddish literary magazine published at that time in Moscow, it was rejected on the grounds the leaders of the Uprising weren't Communists.

Jewish youth then still recall how the so-called fifth entry in their passports, indicating ethnicity, limited access to study at prestigious institutions of higher education, how they had to hide from the all-seeing eye of the KGB, even at parties among close friends, how anti-Zionist caricatures were distributed by the millions—surprisingly reminiscent of Nazi agitation of the sort found in *Der Sturmer*—justifying decisions by the Communist Party to limit emigration to the West, and especially to family in Israel.

I am not exaggerating when I say that at that time, all of the Jews of the USSR as a whole had become an “unreliable ethnicity.”

Bans on emigration and the inability to learn about one's culture unmediated by the editorial decisions made by the ideologues—these were direct violations of human rights, exclusive of the criminal persecutions of the Stalinist era. There were bloody anti-Semitic campaigns, infamous as the “cosmopolitans” and Jewish doctors' cases. In 1952 Yiddish writers were shot and famous physicians were arrested and tortured. After nearly bleeding to death under the Nazi occupation, the Lithuanian Jewish community experienced new loss: the closure and destruction of synagogues. The few still living writers and artists spared no effort to escape Soviet Lithuania for the West. Those who left included the poet Abraham Sutzkever, the writer Shmerel Kacherginsky, the artists Moshe Rosenthal and Rafael Chwoles, among others. Those who stayed later included victims of persecution, including the poets Joshua Latsman and Hirsch Osherovitch. Yiddish-language kindergartens were shut down. The Jewish History Museum

in Vilnius operated for only a few years after the war, and then its collection was dissolved and handed over to other institutions. The Communists destroyed the wounded body of Litvak culture left by the Holocaust. The professional expression of that handful of creative workers who remained was, according to witnesses and sources, severely limited.

The largest blemish of blame on the Soviet regime is probably that, in the absence of any opportunity for free discourse on historical themes, the Communists blew smoke to cover up the true history of the Holocaust. At that time when there was an increase in public interest in Holocaust topics in the West, namely in the early 1960s when Adolf Eichmann, the author of the Final Solution, was put on trial in Jerusalem.

In the 1980s, during the time of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* and the independence movement in Lithuania, Moscow hindered international historians from travelling to Vilnius for a conference on the Jerusalem of Lithuania—the academics held the conference in New York instead.

The attempts by Lithuania's most active Jews to preserve their identity under the Soviet regime were equally significant for Jews in other parts of the USSR and for other peoples behind the Iron Curtain. Dissidents considered the Jewish struggle to preserve their identity part and parcel of the struggle for human rights.

The exhibition “Lithuanian Jews behind the Iron Curtain,” is being presented for the first time in our country. It was prepared based on accessible sources and exhibits from the collections of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, documents from the Lithuanian State Central Archives, materials from the Lithuanian Special Archives and private collections. It represents not just an attempt to fill in the blank spaces in modern history, but also the natural desire to confront the deep anti-Jewish stereotypes which we have inherited from old nationalistic world-views, Nazi agitation and Soviet propaganda, and which appear to undergo public resurrection (and perhaps also in the subconscious of the citizens) given the slightest excuse. I hope this exhibit will help the Lithuanian section of our society in comprehending the true status of Jews in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The historians of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum hope the exhibit will expand visitors' horizons and contribute to the formation of the characters of youths in school, allowing them a fuller view of the history of Lithuania in the 20th century.

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