

The Sounds of Silence *of Jewish Lithuania*

A historic human life is defined not least by its well-quantified ephemerality. The pain of a death is the loss of the individual beloved, not any intellectual surprise at the advent of death-in-itself. For the universality of death is after all as much part of the story of life as the irksome contest to accomplish something of note while the clock yet ticks.

But people and peoples, tribes and nations, leave something of themselves in their children and in other people whose lives they impact, and in the collective culture they bequeath, be it oral or written, or otherwise passed on. The ongoing collective is somehow immune to death in the normal course of things. The “self-preserving culture gene” can be as tenacious as its biological prototype.

But all of that is obliterated when there is genocide, when a people, from newborns to the most aged, is utterly wiped out.

One of the most accomplished genocides in the history of our planet was the Holocaust. And it happened in the living memory of people who are with us still today.

Lithuania, alas, occupies a prominent place in the Holocaust narrative. The percentage of Jewish citizens killed was the highest in Europe — in the mid to high nineties, not least because of the active participation of the local population. It took place in the land that had, for six hundred years, the most rarified record of tolerance in Eastern Europe, where the majesty of Gedymin (Gediminas) and Witold (Vytautas) rang out with fervent pride for all the peoples of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was in its own way a European Union of olden days.

At the same time, it is important never to forget the monumental heroism of those who risked everything to do the right thing and save a neighbor.

The Jews of Lithuania — the Litvaks (Yiddish: *litvakes*) — were not defined by an area congruent with the territory of today’s Republic of Lithuania. Modern Lithuania covers just the westernmost part of Jewish Lithuania, which is called *Lite* in Yiddish, *Lító* in Lithuanian Hebrew, *Líta* in modern Hebrew. Its territory mirrored various stages of the erstwhile Grand Duchy, which once included what is now Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, as well as hefty chunks of northern and eastern Ukraine, northeastern Poland, and some adjacent bits of Russia. But it is Vilnius, the capital of today’s Lithuania, that was also the symbolic capital of Lithuanian (and in some senses European) Jewish culture for centuries. It too has three Jewish names: *Vílne*, *Vílno*, *Vílna*. It earned a fourth, Jerusalem of Lithuania (*Yerusholáyim d’Lító*), for achievements in traditional Jewish scholarship that were out of all proportion to the size or wealth of its Jewish population.

The stature of Jewish Lithuania reached a highpoint with the life and writings of the Gaon of Vilna, Eylióhu ben Shlóyme-Zálmen (Elijah son of Shlomo Zalman, 1720–1797). When the totalitarian Soviet regime decided to dismantle the old Jewish cemetery at Píramónt (now part of Šnipiškės) after the war, permission was given for his bones and gravestone, and those of his immediate family, to be moved.

The original gravestone inscriptions are preserved in a small mausoleum visited by the devout from many parts of the world (pp. 166, 167).

Traditional Jewish religious culture is the oldest of the traditions for which Lithuanian Jewry became prominent. Its writings were in Hebrew and Aramaic, and its vernacular was a singular Lithuanian Yiddish that became the most prestigious form of Yiddish in Europe. In later times it came to form the basis, internationally, of the modern standard literary language. Cultural counterstreams within traditional orthodoxy spanned a rainbow that embraced dancing Lithuanian Hasidim in the far east of Jewish Lithuania (the Chabad movement in the Vitebsk and Mohilov regions) and the sad-sad stern self-improving ethicism (the Musar movement) at its far west. In the classic spirit of East European Jewry, small and otherwise insignificant towns — *shtétlakh* — became world-famous. For Chabad in the east, it was Lyadi (now Lyady in Belarus) and Lubavitch (now Lubavitchy, Russia). For Musar in the west, it was Salánt (now Salantai, Lithuania). Once backwater entities, these little Lithuanian towns were transformed from geographic dots into durable international symbols.

Then there were the modern realms of Jewish civilization, where Lithuanian Jewry also took a lead. The scope was breathtaking. It included the revival of the modern Hebrew language, and its first contemporary-grade literature. And modern Yiddish scholarship and research as a new field of humanistic inquiry. And a unique branch of Jewish socialism that stressed the development of Yiddish as a national Jewish language in the context of autonomy for minorities. The Litvak’s love of learning and education became proverbial. One result was a long line of original, maverick creators, among them the philosopher Solomon Maimon, the inventor of Esperanto Ludwig Leyzer Zamenhof, the artists Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine. For centuries, the compact and exalted culture of Lithuanian Jewry never failed to impress. In his 1899 *Journey through Lithuania* (in Hebrew), Nahum Slouschz comments: “We are in the Jewish country, perhaps the only Jewish country in the world.”

Nowadays the word “genocide” is sometimes trivialized for political advantage by certain states, and by their critics alike. Real genocide, however, leaves a toxic residue: an extinct race. It is no disrespect to the small and vibrant Jewish community of Vilnius and a few other cities today to note that nearly all of the erstwhile 239 Jewish communities on the territory of the Republic of Lithuania are now Jewish ghost towns. This book brings the reader the names of 176 of those places, and images from 74, in a stark collection of compellingly haunting photographs, mostly from the realm of traditional Lithuanian Jewish religious culture: cemeteries, studyhouses, synagogues, shtetl scenes.

Jewish legend is rich in accounts of the souls of the departed rising up in old graveyards into the nightly mists above their bones. In some places, there was a custom of going to the cemetery to invite the souls of the departed to a wedding or other joyous occasion.

The eminently readable Lithuanian Hebrew inscriptions on old gravestones evoke a quiver. They are not only reminders-in-stone of people who once were, but of a people — Lithuanian Jewry — that once was.

As clearly as if it was crafted today, a stone in Malát (Molétai) bemoans the loss of “our mother, the esteemed woman, Tsirl daughter of Chaim, on the second day of the new-month festival of Elul...” The Jewish year lies just beneath the grass or earthline, hiding coyly from the camera, and our eye (p. 21).

Another beloved mother, Merra (Mére), is lamented in the inscription on a leaning stone adorned with a menorah, in Haydútsetshik (Adučiškis) (p. 22).

A stone lying face-up on the ground in Ligmyán (Linkmenys) reads: “Marker for a Living Soul! Here is the place of rest of a dear and honorable man, honest and upright, God fearing, our teacher the rabbi Yekhiel-Míkhel, son of our teacher the rabbi Benyómin [Benjamin] the kohen. And his soul departed in purity on the fifth day of the week, the 25th day of Iyar [5]647 according to the abbreviated reckoning [= Thursday 19 May 1887]. May his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life. God have mercy on him [or: on us].” (p. 25)

There is an intoxicating symbolism about old cemeteries where nature herself has redesigned the rows of upright stones into unrhymed, unrestrained shapes and designs. A Finger-of-God effect that turns a human work into an integral part of a godscape.

The art photographer’s eye adds a new dimension by abstracting a chosen segment. In Seréy (Seirijai), we glimpse a vertical row of three stones (p. 78). The first is rounded, the one behind is pointed with a birch tree by its side, and the last is quadrilateral, playfully hinting at a trapezoid. The rounded name atop the first is clearly visible, and rings out in a silent voice, in biblical cadence, that once upon a time there lived in Seréy a certain man named Shabsai-Sheftl, the son of Meir, of the house of Hurvitz.

The wordless verse of abandoned graveyards is a poetry of the incomplete. Here, a stone gateway into a cemetery stands tall, but there is almost nothing within it, for the gravestones were taken for foundation stones, and as ballast for roads and other local jobs. There, a rounded stone crowned by the wintry branches of a low-encroaching tree almost disappears into the earth, to join the bones it was placed to mark (p. 194).

A forsaken graveyard discovered in a forest, in a field, on a hilltop, arouses some poignant romanticism, akin to an archaeological thrill, about a people long gone. That it has been uncared-for usually means that the descendants of those people moved away long-long ago, or for one reason or another disappeared. But in Lithuania, these are graveyards of the dead whose children, grandchildren and friends were all murdered and lie buried in mass graves where hundreds, or thousands, of people were taken to be humiliated and shot, solely because of their race. Sometimes the mass grave is on or near the old Jewish cemetery, most often it is in the forest outside of town. The last mohicanesque Litvaks in Lithuania, whose families lie in one of the country’s two hundred mass graves, never fail to mention the good fortune of people who pass away in peace and have a stone erected to their memory.

There is a distinct feeling imparted by desolate buildings, mostly old synagogues, of wood or stone. The word “synagogue” cannot begin to do justice to the intricate specificities in the living culture itself. Yiddish has, among other terms, *kloyz* and *klayzl*, *besmédrash* and *shul*, *besmédrashl* and *shulkhl*, *yeshíve* and *yeshívele*,

for various types of prayerhouses, studyhouses, or both. Each shtetl synagogue also had its “proper name” as in: *di gríne kloyz* (“the green *kloyz*”), or *der náyer besmédrash* (“the new *besmédrash*”), which, not infrequently, was itself centuries old — but remained “new” relative to the shtetl’s *álter besmédrash*.

At many a studyhouse in the Lithuanian shtetl, the melody of Talmudic study wafted out of candle-lit windows deep into the night. They were places where Jewish people met to pray and to learn, and to exchange news and views. Where the rich Lithuanian Yiddish of their speech harmonized with the Hebrew and Aramaic of the prayers, and with the ancient and more recent tomes studied.

The prayer and studyhouse images in this book span a spectrum, from the heart of the big city to the remote little shtetl. In present-day Vilnius, the famed *Zavl Shul* (*Zavl* Synagogue) is an eerie ruin situated at the confluence of two streets: Blúmen-gas (now Gélių) and Sadóve (Sodų), in a rough neighborhood a moment from the railway and bus stations (pp. 172, 173). Its entrance is via a courtyard, where one can still see the cylindrical mini-tower attached to the building to encircle in splendor its sacred ark housing the scrolls of the Torah.

In faraway Pokróy (Pakruojis), the ruin of a wooden synagogue that now looks like any old barn (p. 40), was once famous for its interior wall paintings. One wall had a portrait of a resting lion above a line from the prophet Amos: “The lion hath roared, who will not fear?” (Amos 3:8). The people of Pokróy needed no reminder of the second half of the verse: “God almighty hath spoken, who would not go and prophesy?” Another wall had a painting of a train pulling into the town’s newly built station. The Jewish townspeople were so proud of their Pokróy getting its own station, that they celebrated with a painting on the wall of their wooden synagogue.

May the current and future neighbors of these stones and structures find the wisdom and energy to discover and cherish what once existed in their own hometown. And to foster ideas for restoring a forlorn ruin and putting it to use in a manner that simultaneously honors the memory of the people who made it and inhabited it before their destruction.

The last Litvaks to come to any maturity before the Holocaust face the twilight of their time on this earth. For visitors from near and from far, the realia whose photographs grace these pages will soon be the only visible relics of their lost civilization in its historic homeland.

Books have been written about the history of the Jews of Lithuania. Books have appeared with collections of prewar photographs. You have before you a third dimension: artistic photographs of the scant remains of graveyards and prayerhouses and other relics, that kindle another way to feel and to touch the Lithuanian Jewish atlantis.

Once they have quickened the pulse, these haunting images go on to inspire a further journey of discovery into the languages, literature, culture and history of the remarkable people who left us these enchanting vestiges.

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