

## Thinking Outside the Books – The Opening of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library

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### Abstract

This presentation outlines the seven year process of creating the Vilnius Jewish Public Library which opened on December 16, 2011 as the first Jewish public library in Lithuania since the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto in September of 1943. I had the idea of a new center of Jewish life and culture in Lithuania while I was living in San Diego, California working as an independent bookseller who only knew the work of libraries from a volunteer perspective. From the very beginning, I wanted to create a library dedicated to promoting tolerance, understanding, and acceptance.

Libraries face increasing competition from sources such as the Internet, cable and satellite television, smart phones, and e-book readers. It is necessary to find new ways to bring people through the doors of any library. A Jewish library in Vilnius needs to attract a variety of local visitors in a nation with only a few thousand Jews out of a population of over three million.

My way to bring people through the doors is to offer a collection that covers the widest possible swath. The Vilnius Jewish Public Library is designed to promote not only Jewish culture but also culture created by Jews. The shelves will hold the most scholarly tomes on Torah and Mishnah. Serious books of Jewish life and history will be sitting alongside row after row of heartbreaking stories of the Shoah.

All of the above belong in any real Jewish library. At the same time, such books alone would most likely bring in only scholars and some of the very few local Jews. The library has to bring in Jew and Gentile, young and old, scholar and student. The books of Faye Kellerman will rest alphabetically near those of Franz Kafka. Both will be somewhere in the middle between works by Woody Allen and Wendy Wasserstein. The library will have *Munich* and *Schindler's List* by director Steven Spielberg. Yet it would not do justice to ignore *E.T.* or *Indiana Jones* simply for the fact that they are not "Jewish" or "serious" enough. The library will have Klezmer and liturgical music, but a visitor can also listen to Barbra Streisand, Michael Bolton, the Beastie Boys, and even KISS. Films and music can inspire as well as the written word.

Two prominent figures played a major role in how the library has developed: the Jewish American entertainer Al Jolson and Jewish mystery writer Harry Kemelman. Al Jolson, born in Lithuania in 1886, contributed to the library and my life in ways I could not have foreseen. I also have to thank Harry Kemelman for being the one to inspire the project. Kemelman

died in 1996, Jolson died in 1950, yet they still have the power to inspire both Jew and non-Jew.

A Jewish library unlike any in the world might be a good way to promote tolerance, understanding, and ultimately acceptance. To bring people together in a country which still has to come to terms with its own role during the Holocaust, the library will also function as a cultural center inviting to talks, readings, and film nights. I strongly believe that popular culture is much more likely to bring people together than constantly hammering home a point with the serious stick. This is the mission and purpose of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library.

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### **Slide 3: Introductory video**

Lithuania – a historic overview

### **Slide 4: maps**

First known written record of Lithuania being mentioned took place in 1009. Jews are first known to have lived in the territory of Lithuania as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century (**slide 5: Annals of Quedlingburg**).

### **Slide 6: the dukes**

The Grand Duke Gediminas was the empire builder of Lithuania. The country spanned from the Baltic to the Black Sea. His grandson Vytautas, a Catholic, granted the Jews living in the territory several charters of rights in the 1380s. This is when Jews started to be recognized as their own distinct group.

### **Slide 7: Casimir the Great**

In the 14th century, there was increased cooperation between Lithuanian and Polish Jews. The death of Casimir the Great saw a rise in intolerance toward Polish Jews. The Jewish community in Poland worked with the Lithuanian Jews to secure a special charter. Two problems faced the Polish Jews: 1) King Louis of Anjou's desire to convert the Jews to Catholicism and 2) a competition from immigrant Jews coming from Germany.

### **Slide 8: Alexander Jagiellon**

Jews lived a fairly peaceful life in Lithuania until their expulsion in 1495 by Alexander Jagiellon, then the Grand Duke of Lithuania. When he also became King of Poland, he sent the Jews back to Lithuania in 1503. However, the expulsion and the subsequent return were accomplished without violence.

**Slide 9: timeline**

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established in 1569. The union came about because of a mutual interest in protecting themselves from Germans and even more from the Russians. In 1795, Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire.

Northern Lithuania was more influenced by German culture (it was mostly Protestant), the rest of the country was more influenced by the Polish culture (and therefore was mostly Catholic).

In 1918, after WWI, Lithuania became an independent republic under the German occupation. Vilna at this time was occupied by the Poles, Kaunas functioned as the capital of the independent republic of Lithuania.

The secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 guaranteed the Soviet Union control over Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Shortly after that, the Soviets occupied Vilna together with the rest of its share of Poland – as agreed upon with the Germans.

However, the Germans competed with the Soviets for the goodwill of the Baltic States. Therefore, when the Nazis invaded Lithuania in 1941, they were seen as liberators from the Communist Empire.

The Nazis received total support from the Lithuanian population. Lithuanians believed that Germany would help them to gain independence from Soviet domination. This plays a major role in the Lithuanians willingly help to murder more than 90% of the Jewish population in Lithuania, the highest percentage in all of Europe during WWII.

The founding of the Vilnius Jewish Public Library

**Slide 10: the beginning of the VJPL**

I had the idea for the library in 2004. A friend of mine became interested in Jewish culture thanks to a book I gave her. The book was a *Rabbi Small* mystery by Harry Kemelman. She became so interested that she ended up writing an article about Jews in Mexico which ended up being published. That in turn inspired me to combine three major interests of mine: reading, Jewish culture, and Lithuania.

As a teenager, I enjoyed reading non-fiction books about WWII. This led me to want to visit Europe. My first time in Eastern Europe was in 1991 when I went to Russia, in 1993 I went to Prague. That's what really started my interest in Jewish culture. I saw an exhibition of art created by children who had perished in the camps; only their artwork had survived. I came out feeling depressed as anyone would, but then I came across an old Jewish cemetery. There I saw an orthodox Rabbi leading a group of his followers. I immediately started to feel better because I realized that there was still life. What led me to Lithuania was a book that I read called *The Hills of Vilnius*. That work of fiction made Vilna sound so interesting that I knew I had to go there. I did some research about the history of the city and heard that it

once was known as the Jerusalem of the North. Only 10 years later, as I already mentioned, things came together when I had the idea of starting a library in that city to bring back Jewish culture.

So, what I did in 2004 was to start collecting Jewish books. The Idea for the library was still very vague, I had no contacts with anyone of the Jewish community or of anyone in Lithuania. Over the years of collecting material, I formed the concept of the library: I wanted to have books, films, music, and artwork created by Jews as well as anything with a Jewish topic. I thought the broader the collection, the more people would walk through the library's doors. First, I could not simply focus on the Jewish population in Lithuania since only a few thousand are left. And second, I thought my goal of promoting tolerance and understanding would be a lot easier to accomplish with a not only serious but also entertaining collection.

By 2007, I had collected about 4,500 items ready to ship to Lithuania. So far, there had not been much interest for my idea, neither in the USA nor in Europe. But then there was a breakthrough thanks to an article about my idea in *The Forward*. In 2008, I had the items shipped over to Vilna where they were stored at the Jewish Museum which had shown interest in opening a library with my material. Then in 2009, it turned out that my vision for the library and the Jewish Museum's vision for it went in two different directions. I was almost back at the beginning. I had to find a new home for the material. There were two more offers that year which also fell through, this time due to lack of finding a proper space.

Finally, in 2010, everything came together when I had the offer from the Lithuanian government to provide space and financing for the library. It would become part of the already existing Mickeviciaus library, just that they would fix up an entirely new space.

I met with several people from the Lithuanian government including the chancellor. The deal was that they provide the space for the library as well as the staff members and utilities. I would provide them with the material. On December 16th of 2011, the library finally opened its doors. Speakers included the Prime Minister, members of the Jewish community, the Minister of Culture, and more.

#### **Slide 11: library space and opening (video)**

On a personal note, you might have heard of Al Jolson who was billed as the world's greatest entertainer. He was a Litvak born in a small village in Lithuania in 1886. In September of 2010, I did some research on the first talkie *The Jazz Singer* as I wanted a copy of that film for the library. I went to [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) and read about a recent feature-length documentary called *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer* created by two German graduate students. I went to their website, [www.aj-images.com](http://www.aj-images.com), and contacted them to ask if I could obtain a copy for the library. The director, Andrea Oberheiden, not only promised to send their feature film but also all of the other short films they had done on Jolson. Only a few weeks later, her film partner Jens Reinke came over to Vilnius along with two Jolson relatives as they are still working on a feature-length documentary about Jolson's career (**slide 12: silent footage**).

I kept in contact with Andrea who could not come to Vilnius with her film partner. Instead, she invited me over to come to Kiel, Germany to attend Kristallnacht ceremonies on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010. The director even arranged for a flight which was paid for by a sponsor. Andrea and Jens both helped me gather material from Germany and Austria before I would fly back to Vilnius. They arranged meetings with Jewish community leaders and museum directors in Hamburg, Berlin, Lübeck, Rendsburg, and Dorsten. They also became so interested in my library project that they have started to work on a documentary about the founding of the library. In 2011, they managed to arrange a huge donation coming from the Int'l. Al Jolson Society which covered all of Jolson's film and recording works – among many other items. The Vilnius Jewish Public Library is the only place in the world which makes all of Jolson's work available to the public (**slide 13: AJ-Images and donation trips**). On August 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2012, Ms. Andrea Oberheiden became my wife (**slide 14: photo**).

#### **Slide 15: Kristallnacht video**

My role in the library, besides being the founder, is that of an honorary director and chairman which allows me to function as an ambassador who promotes the library to an international audience (**slide 16: closing video**).

*Note: All videos were created by Andrea Oberheiden-Brent | [www.aj-images.com](http://www.aj-images.com)*