

TRAVELING IN SEARCH OF

# Yiddishland

## CONTEMPORARY JEWISHNESS IN YIDDISHLAND

THE ACADEMIC AND  
CULTURAL  
INSTITUTIONS OF  
TODAY

## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

JEWISH MARK  
MAKING AND  
MEMORIALS

## TOURING YIDDISHLAND

ON THE IMPORTANCE  
OF MAPPING  
SPACE & VIRTUALITY





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# SEARCHING FOR YIDDISHLAND

I went in search of Yiddishland with my classmates on spring break of my senior year. Car-sick and anxious to get our travels started, we all chatted exuberantly on the van ride to the airport. We knew that the purpose of our trip was, in fact, rather unique, however, we had a rather undefined vision of our own purpose.

The class, an interdisciplinary seminar of the Program in Jewish Studies taught by Yiddish scholar Justin Cammy, was simply called "Yiddishland." We had read voraciously on the subject in class for seven weeks before we left, but the fact remained that we were all going to Warsaw, Poland and Vilnius, Lithuania, under the umbrella of this class trip but with vastly different understandings of why. Were we searching for ghosts, memories, ghosts of memories? Six out of the thirteen of us had learned Yiddish in college; were we looking to see the homeland of our second language? We were a group of different backgrounds and interests, united by a common interest in diaspora; were we in search of diaspora culture? We took comfort in the academia of it all, in our big binders full of literature and maps, but while traveling, whispers of emotional responses took place behind closed hotel room doors.

Some of us weren't sure we were going to Yiddishland at all. Michael Wex, the Canadian author behind *Born to Kvetch*, has called Yiddish the "national language of nowhere," so where does one go to see nowhere? Spoken by European Jews since the sixteenth century, Yiddish moved with the Jews who spoke it as they moved eastward. A fusion language primarily made of German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and a smattering of Slavic languages, Yiddish eventually settled down with its speakers in Eastern Europe, with Warsaw and Vilnius as its major capitals. Yiddish is often portrayed as having died with the Holocaust, so if there is no language and there is no "where," then what is Yiddishland?

Jeffrey Shandler, in his essay "Imagining Yiddishland" suggests that "Yiddishland is the language's ideal locus, a Yiddish utopia," but where that exists is a topic of debate. Is Yiddishland where Yiddish is currently spoken? If so, our trip was in vain. Yiddish is rarely spoken in Poland or Lithuania outside of a few, small circles. If Yiddishland is "a locus defined by language," and the "printed page," then Yiddishland lived in our laptops and class readings, only accessible to a third of the class. The only acceptable model for our class was to define Yiddishland as a "turf, not a language," one of the many possibilities that Shandler mulls over. Only then would touring Vilnius and Warsaw become a trip to Yiddishland.



Of course, these definitions are primarily concerned with post-war possibilities for Yiddishland. There was a true space, or true spaces, where Yiddishland existed before the Holocaust. Cecile Kuznitz writes on the Jewish geography of Vilnius, “largely created through the use of a distinct language. While the city officially changed from Vilna to Wilno to Vilnius, for Jews the city continued to be Yerushalayim d’lite (the Jerusalem of Lithuania).” Marked by synagogue courtyards, Yiddish “verbal markers,” and Yiddish street signs, Vilnius was a metropolis of Yiddish life and literature, producing such great names as Moyshe Kulbak, Avrom Sutzkever, and Chayim Grade. Much the same could be said for Warsaw, where Yiddish in the inter-war period became the language of heated political debate and Jewish youth movements.

Now, in the post-war period, I am inclined to agree with Jeffrey Shandler who wrote that many post-war Yiddishlands engage with Yiddish “as a post-vernacular language.” Yiddish postvernacularity has swept through some of the biggest Yiddish cultural institutions in the world, and as “the need to define Yiddishland explicitly” becomes understood as a necessity, “efforts to conjure Yiddishland take place in languages other than Yiddish.” To engage with the concept of Yiddishland without the language is an exercise in emptiness, which some of our classmates picked up on.

What was the use of visiting the “turf” of Yiddishland if there was no Yiddish to be heard, the majority of Yiddish appearing on monuments, markers, and aging store fronts? And what about the majority of students who couldn’t understand it, anyway?

The following pages are an attempt to wrestle with the possible meanings of this collective experience. They are an engagement with Yiddish academia, tourism, memory and memorialization, place and placemaking, and past and present Jewish communities. They can also function as a very specific type of guide: if you, too, want to understand Yiddishland and wonder where to start, consider the following...

-- Teddy Schneider, Editor and Creator of Yiddishland Magazine



# TRAVEL TIPS FOR TOURISTS IN YIDDISHLAND

Traveling to Yiddishland can be difficult if you don't have a set itinerary and syllabus like our class this semester. Here are some tips we've compiled from our trip participants to help get you started.

## 1. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Because Yiddishland is a transnational space with a long history of literature, political engagement, food, music, and more, take the time before your trip to really get to know the history of the places you're going to see. Once you're there, it will help you if you're situated in your recently acquired background knowledge, rather than trying to conceptualize Yiddishland *and* see what's in front of you at the same time.

## 2. PROCURE A COPY OF "SAY IT IN YIDDISH"

If you're seeking Yiddishland in Eastern Europe, a must-buy is the tiny pamphlet "Say it in Yiddish!" published in 1958. Although Jeffrey Shandler reminds his readers that at the time of its publication there were still many Yiddish speaking communities around the globe, the book has become something of a debate topic among Yiddish intellectuals and creative minds. Of course, "Say It in Yiddish!" will be utterly useless in Eastern Europe today. Still, we at Yiddishland Magazine believe that if you're going in search of Yiddishland you should at least speak a little Yiddish... even if it's just "I don't speak very good Yiddish."

## 3. DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT FROM YOUR TOUR

Deciding what you want from your tour is an essential part of any trip, but in the case of Yiddishland there's much to decide specific to Jewishness and Yiddish. Are you interested in Jewish death? Jewish life? Both? If you're interested in Jewish life, are you interested in historical Jewish cultural sites? Do monuments to Jewish achievements spark your interest? What about contemporary Jewish culture? With the answers to these questions in mind, we hope that Yiddishland Magazine will help you decide where to go and the types of questions you might want to ask.





THE POLITICS OF

# MONUMENTS & MEMORY

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One of the most prominent features of the Eastern European post-war Jewish landscape is that of the monument.

Almost everywhere of any major Jewish importance in Warsaw or Vilnius one can expect to find at least a small plaque or statue signifying the Jewish nature of the space.

Engaging with monuments and efforts of memorialization on a constant basis, as one must do when they travel to explore Yiddishland in Poland and Lithuania, can be emotionally exhausting. Our group was fortunate enough to be able to confront questions of how government, identity, language, history and memory can all convene at the site of the monument.





## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

### YIDDISH & LITHUANIAN PLAQUES IN VILNIUS

Dovid Katz, scholar, author, and eccentric, lives in Vilnius, Lithuania. He is the organizer of a website and movement called "Defending History." Katz's mission statement on [defendinghistory.org](http://defendinghistory.org) states that the organization "believes it is important to resist attempts to impose Double Genocide as a new model for World War II history," that is, Katz works to deny the fact that Lithuanians and Jews were equally targeted by the Nazis and following Soviet occupation. In addition to providing a comprehensive guide to reading Jewish gravestones and keeping his followers informed of all local (and even international) political events having to do with all things Jewish and Holocaust, Katz takes a special interest in the plaques and street signs all around Vilnius that have written Yiddish on them. In an article on the decision to place modern Hebrew first on a street sign denoting the "Jewish Street" of Vilnius, Katz celebrates Vilnius's status as

"the only city in the world with municipally sponsored public plaques and signs that regularly include Yiddish," but reprimands the city for prioritizing Hebrew for all the Israeli heritage tourists who come to Vilna by putting Hebrew above Yiddish on a street sign. Katz, in a private lecture for our class in his apartment, told us that he regularly participates in the writing and placement of plaques around Vilnius denoting not only street names, but the homes of famous Yiddish writers and the sites of Holocaust atrocities. Katz's obsession with maintaining Yiddish as one of the primary languages of monument-making and memorialization may seem overly enthusiastic, but his efforts (and the efforts of those who share his opinions, at least to some degree) have created another kind of Yiddishland not discussed by Shandler in his imaginings of what a Yiddishland could be: a Yiddishland of memorialization.



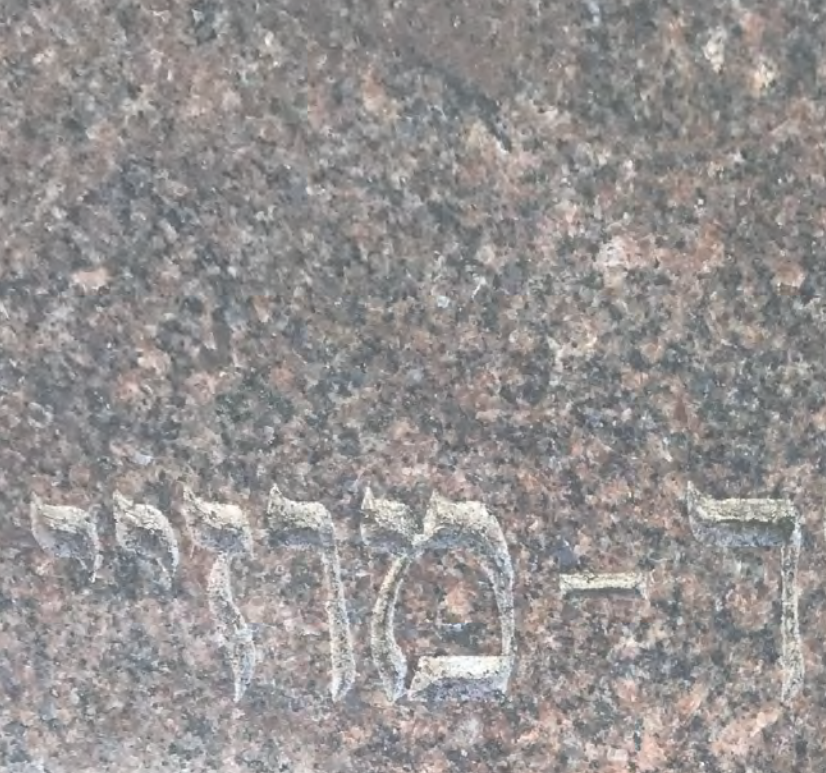
# THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

## PONAR

Katz's interest in Yiddish signage is a good entry point for discussing other monuments and memorials found all around Eastern Europe. Our class only went to one site where Jews were murdered during the Holocaust: Ponar. A forest in the Lithuanian countryside, Ponar is primarily composed of several large pits. Jews living in the Vilna Ghetto were brought to Ponar to be liquidated; they were shot in the head and then buried in the pits. Signs and monuments are scattered throughout Ponar, but the most prominent one is just outside the forest, at the parking lot so that visitors see it before entering the site. The sign has three languages: Lithuanian on the left, Yiddish in the center, and Russian on the right — the sign was erected during the Soviet period in Lithuania, another political layer in Lithuania's history of Holocaust monuments. According to Eliyah, our tour guide of Vilnius, the sign once read that this memorial was in honor of "victims of fascism." It has since been changed so that the Yiddish in the center reads: "Here, in this forest, from June 1941 - June 1944, Hitler's soldiers and their local accomplices murdered 100,000 people — of those, 70,000 were Jews — men, women, and children." This particular sign is an example of the evolution of politics literally being etched into and out of stone.







## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

### PONAR CONT.

Oddly, other signs besides memorial plaques also have Yiddish. A particularly striking sign reads, in Yiddish, "Ponar Museum: Part of the Government Jewish Museum," indicating that the building that the sign points towards is a museum to all of the murdered Jews who would have been able to read the sign. This is similar to Dovid Katz's creation of a Yiddishland of memorials and plaques. I was fortunate enough to be able to read these memorials — my English-only speaking peers were unable to access them — but I was simultaneously aware that they were not created for young, American scholars, or even those who had learned Yiddish in their homes. These signs are in Yiddish for the sake of Yiddish being present at the execution site of those who spoke it.

Ponar is also home to another kind of memorial: the personal, individual memorial. On many flat surfaces, or anything resembling a grave, many people have left stones as part of the traditional Jewish custom of leaving stones on graves. Some of the stones have names written on them, some of them do not. They represent the individual aspect of loss, set apart from debates like those on [defendinghistory.org](http://defendinghistory.org) not only by their lack of Yiddish but their lack of public action.



## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

### UMSHLAGPLATZ

Let us also consider those monuments erected by the Polish government. These “official” memorials include sites like the umschlagplatz, the train station where Jews were deported from the Warsaw ghetto to liquidation, and the Mila 18 Bunker, a site of Jewish resistance. Like the Lithuanian plaques, these memorials are often polylingual, featuring Yiddish and English. The umschlagplatz, in addition to utilizing Yiddish as memorial, also features a nod to the specific placement of the monument. At the top of the walled entrance to the umschlagplatz is an engraved metal depiction of broken trees. Behind it, there is a living tree which blooms in Spring and Summer. This is supposed to denote new life or Jewish continuity, given that the broken trees are supposed to evoke those Jews killed after leaving the umschlagplatz. One monument that does not have Yiddish put in place by the Polish government is the actual mapping of the boundaries of the Warsaw Ghetto. Featured on the table of contents page, the line that appears along sidewalks and streets reads “Ghetto Wall 1940” in English and the same in Polish with the year 1943. It is of considerable note that when for practical purposes such as mapping (as opposed to personal or political purposes such as memorialization) Yiddish is no longer included in the project of making memory spaces.







## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

### YIDDISH GRAFFITI

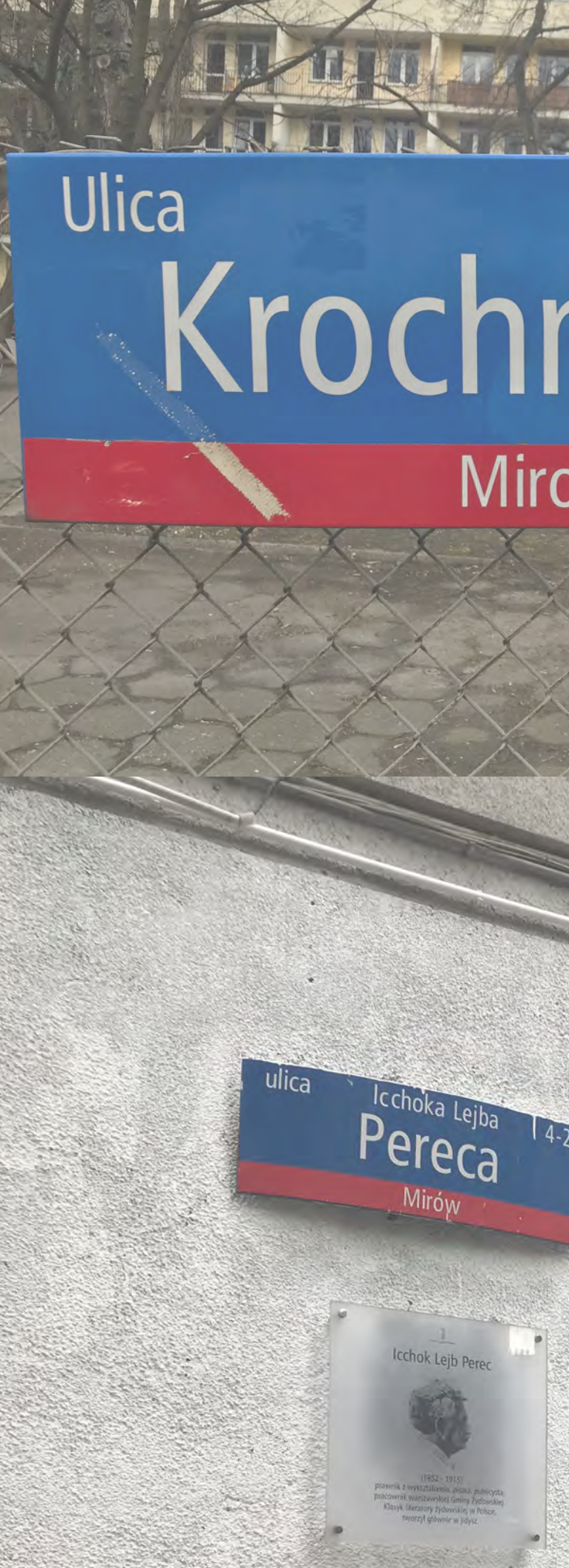
Another Yiddish memorialization project is taking place in Warsaw. All around the city, graffiti using the stencil pictured on this page has appeared on walls and buildings. In Polish and Yiddish the graffiti reads, "there was a ghetto here." The reminders popped up seemingly everywhere our group went, and although they were starting to fade from age, they presented another kind of memorial that our class excitedly had been awaiting. Because the graffiti was done either by a single individual or a small group of local activists, they are something akin to both Dovid Katz's project and the official Ponar memorials. The graffiti utilizes Yiddish as a language of memory and memorialization, a nod to the missing Jewish population that simultaneously proposes that it honors the murdered Jews by speaking their language because of its performative presence, and reminds Polish citizens that they are walking on a type of hallowed ground. The audience for this graffiti is, once again, not people like our class but rather those who interact with Jewish spaces.



## THE POLITICS OF MONUMENTS

### STREET NAMES

Finally, there is the issue of street names. Once again a concern of mapping rather than memorialization, our class encountered countless streetnames of the utmost importance to our previous encounters with Yiddishland through literature. Peretz, the writer well known as one of the three classic writers of Yiddish literature, is remembered via the Polish name of the street on which he once lived, Pereca Street, which is Peretz's name in Polish. Interestingly, this street sign is not on the actual street on which Peretz lived — this would be impossible seeing as most of Warsaw was destroyed during WWII. Our tour guides in Warsaw consistently used the canned phrase: "After the war, Warsaw was a sea of rubble." Peretz's apartment and the street it was on no longer exist. The name was given to a street in approximately the same location as Peretz's apartment. It is accompanied by a Vietnamese restaurant sign and a Polish mailbox which reads "post office," and no plaque for Peretz himself. Something similar is true of Krochmalna street, the subject of Isaac Bashevis Singer's work "My Father's Court," an exploration of his religious childhood as taking place in the street and courtyard where his family lived. There is no longer the same Krochmalna street. Our guides were only able to give an approximation of where the family home would have been, and no marker denotes the literary or cultural importance of the site. Street names like Krochmalna are not truly memorial sites like Pereca Street, however for those searching Yiddishland they become akin to it, a silent reminder of what once was and is no longer.







# CONTEMPORARY JEWISHNESS

## Exploring Jewish Communities in Eastern Europe

Leading up to our trip, our class on Yiddishland had focused considerably on prewar Jewish life in Poland and in Lithuania. It was only during our trip that we were truly introduced to the idea of contemporary Jewish life in the Yiddishland we were visiting. We were aware of one major political event in Poland merely five weeks before we arrived: The Polish government had passed a law outlawing any suggestion of Polish responsibility in the Holocaust. This would go on to shape some of our encounters with contemporary Jewishness especially in Poland.

Although we encountered contemporary Jewishness in a variety of indirect and undefinable ways, the reality of contact with active Jewish communities can be broken down into two categories: the cultural or religious institutions and the academic institutions. Academia is a heavy presence in contemporary Eastern European Yiddishland, despite its best efforts to bridge the gap (at times) between culture and scholarship. Of course, as a group of young scholars, we were most prepared to engage with scholarly organizations. Nevertheless, the cultural and religious institutions we met with along the way shed light onto some of the most interesting aspects of our trip and confronted us with what it means to inhabit this Yiddishland today, rather than up until 1939.



# Warsaw JCC

*Contemporary Jewishness  
in Eastern Europe Cont.*

Because Barnard-Columbia Hillel, another group of students traveling through Eastern Europe, happened to be in Warsaw at the same time our class as studying there, we had the pleasure of dining with them at the Warsaw Jewish Community Center (which has embraced its acronym, JCC). The mission statement on the website for this beautiful little building, full of color and hip design, reads as follows: “JCC is a space where — in an atmosphere of openness, pluralism and mutual respect — everyone can become and feel a member of the Jewish community. We give the opportunity to experience contemporary Jewish culture and encourage you to get involved creating it. Working with prominent academic teachers and educators, we offer top-class informal Jewish education.”

We ate a delicious dinner in a relaxed environment and, true to the promise of the JCC, the student groups took up the project of discussing Jewish history, the role of this trip in our scholarship and in our personal lives, and what Jewish community meant on our two campuses as well as in Poland.



The Jewish Community Center director of communications and programming, Marta Saracyn, closed out our visit with a brief introduction to what she felt the function of the JCC was. Most notably, she reminded her audience of American students that Polish Jewishness was not always so cut and dry a category, and the JCC’s policy of welcoming everyone was not only a project in cross-cultural interaction, but of helping those who have discovered previously hidden Jewish roots to feel that they could easily be a part of the Warsaw Jewish Community.



# Vilnius Jewish Center of Culture and Information

## *Contemporary Jewishness in Eastern Europe Cont.*

Things got a little less hip and much more politically complicated when it came to cultural and religious institutions of Vilnius. Our first encounter with a Jewish cultural center came when, on a freezing day, we were welcomed into a warm little building to take a break from our tour. The front of the building said “Jewish Center of Culture and Information” in Yiddish and in Lithuanian. The space was divided into two parts, and as our tour guide Eliyah began chatting with the woman behind the

counter, we began to explore. There was a gift shop, which contained mostly souvenirs of Lithuania such as amber necklaces, fridge magnets with important Vilnius architecture on them and the like, as well as Jewish religious objects and symbols like yarmulkes and menorahs. The other side of the building was a cafe. Closed on the day of our visit, it nevertheless seemed like an odd addition to a space that was so small, especially considering what was about to happen.



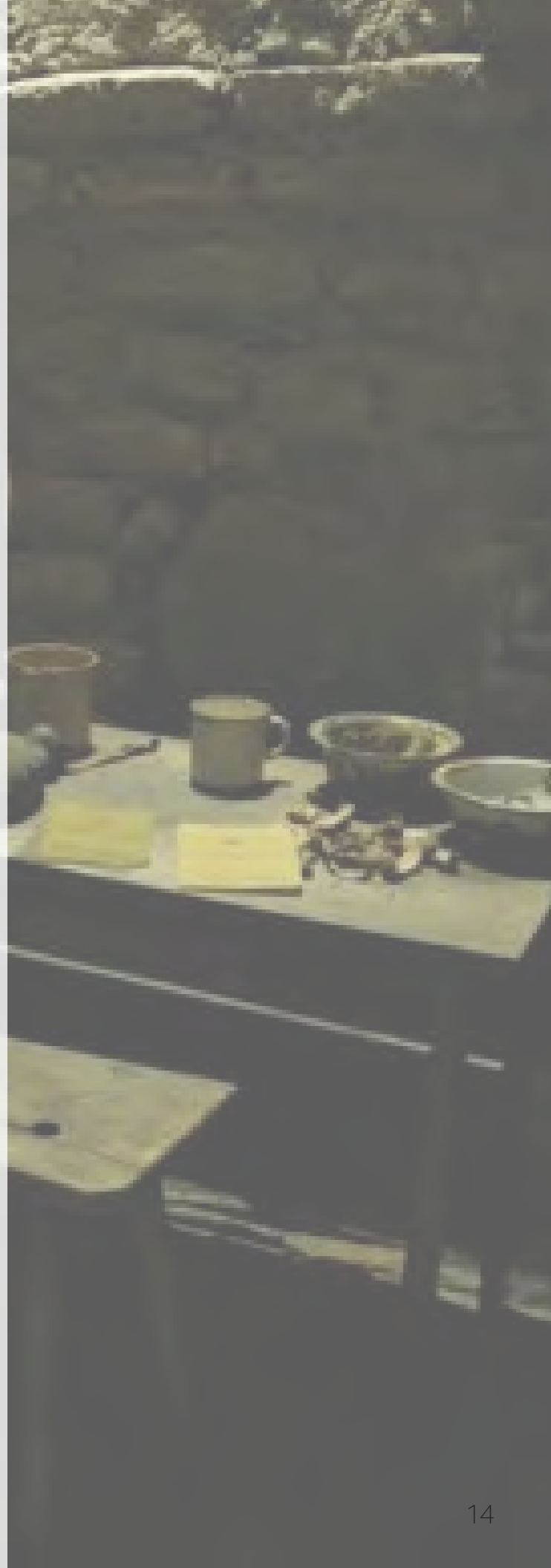


# Vilnius Jewish Center of Culture and Information

## *Contemporary Jewishness in Eastern Europe Cont.*

Eliyah lead our group of thirteen students and four accompanying chaperones into the basement of the building, the floor of which was covered with bubbled-up linoleum, and into a small room. We all sat and looked at well lit photographs of Nazi orders as Eliyah told us about what a “malina” was — a small space hidden in a building where a Jewish family would be able to hide from Nazi aktions. They would be hollowed out of walls and stocked in secret, even from other Jewish families who might demand entry or tell Nazis for their own protection. I began to feel uncomfortable. Were we in a malina now? Eliyah finished his lecture and silently turned to the wall behind him, pulled on a brick, and a door was revealed. With this grandiose performance our class was introduced to an actual malina, reconstructed as a museum exhibition.

We all filed in to the dark, cramped space before we began to filter out, unsure of how to emotionally process being surprised by the malina, stepping inside of it, and walking back upstairs to find an empty cafe and gift shop. Notably, on the website of the Jewish Center of Culture and Information, there are only two things listed as attractions: the malina exhibit and lectures on Holocaust history. The experience was, if nothing else, a reminder of the ways in which Jewish culture and the Holocaust can be easily conflated, not only in non-Jewish perceptions, but in a Yiddishland where the definition of Jewish culture is malleable — one is reminded of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Manhattan, which is also essentially a Holocaust museum. This model of Yiddishland is not unique to Eastern Europe.





# VILNIUS JEWISH COMMUNITY

## *CONTEMPORARY JEWISHNESS IN EASTERN EUROPE CONT.*

We also had a brief encounter with Lithuanian Jews. We had the pleasure of dining with some of them twice, once at our hotel and once again at their community center, which was once a Hebrew language school. Amit, an outgoing and entertaining personality, told us quite a few stories about the funny people she knew in the Jewish community, the local gossip, and big happenings on the political scale for Jews in Lithuania. She told us of several different Lithuanian Jewish groups, but because the population is so small they often blended together both in membership and her description of them. The Jewish Community in Lithuania, for instance, whose website depicts community fun as well as political work, is different from Chabad Vilnius, which is much more concerned — perhaps obviously — with Jewish religious life, but both are different from the group that Amit is part of.

We met with Amit and her friends for a second time for shabbes dinner in their beautiful space, which contained a dining hall, a grand foyer, and even a photo gallery of Jewish Lithuania. About fifteen local people were present for our meal, many of whom later admitted to us that they were there because Amit had asked them to be and were not regular attendees. There were a considerable number among them who were Israelis in Lithuania to complete medical school, and plenty of older members of the congregation who were pleasantly interested in our studies. They told us about a Jewish, Kosher bakery that they ran throughout the week, and even gave us some desserts proudly as a gift. At dinner there was also much discussion of what Jewishness meant in our respective cultures. Amit was shocked that American Jews did not have to provide proof of Jewishness to attend synagogues, while the American students attempted to understand the various Jewish religious and communal institutions of Vilnius.



# WHO WILL REMAIN, WHAT WILL REMAIN?

Who will remain, what will remain? A wind will remain behind,  
there will remain the blindness of the disappearing blind.

There will remain a string of foam: a sign of the sea,  
there will remain a puff of cloud hooked upon a tree.

Who will remain, what will remain? A syllable will remain behind,  
primeval, to cultivate its creation again in time.

There will remain a fiddlerose in honor of itself alone,  
to be understood by seven blades of all grass that grows.

More than all the stars there are from north to here,  
there will remain the star that falls in a true tear.

A drop of wine will always remain in a pitcher too.

Who will remain? God will remain, isn't that enough for you?

Avrom Sutzkever, 1977

Translated from Yiddish by Maia Evrona, 2014



# ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AS CONTEMPORARY YIDDISHLANDS

EXPLORING THE POLIN MUSEUM, THE VILNA  
GAON STATE MUSEUM, THE RINGELBLUM  
ARCHIVES, THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF  
LITHUANIA, AND TSVISHN MAGAZINE.

Fragment testamentu Geli Seksztajn, włożony  
przez męża do zakopywanych skrzynek wraz  
z jej pracami



Many scholarly institutions loom large in the contemporary landscape of Jewishness in Eastern Europe. Beyond the eccentric Dovid Katz, who hosts lectures in his apartment and maintains his website, [defendinghistory.org](http://defendinghistory.org), the majority of Jewish academic organizations in the Yiddishland we visited were museums and archives. Considering that the cultural and religious elements of Eastern European Jewishness today are small in comparison, the sheer number and incredible substance of these scholarly institutions drastically shaped our perceptions of Yiddishland. It is also possible that, because we ourselves were coming from an academic institution and looking for Yiddishland within a scholarly framework, that bias shaded what we wanted to or were willing to see as essential hallmarks of contemporary Yiddishland in Warsaw and Vilnius. Nevertheless, these intellectual endeavors were what our class tended to spend the most time discussing, analyzing, and engaging with fully. Yiddishland academia today is primarily watched over by the Polin Museum in Warsaw and its Lithuanian counterpart the Vilna Gaon State Museum, The Ringelblum Archive, and The National Archives of Lithuania in cooperation with YIVO (The Yiddish Scientific Institute).



# ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AS CONTEMPORARY YIDDISHLANDS

CONT.

## THE POLIN MUSEUM (WARSAW)

Our first stop off the plane, haggard and exhausted, was Warsaw's Polin Museum on the history of Polish Jews. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, a scholar involved with the founding of the museum who is still on its board, wrote: "By referring to Polish Jews, rather than Jews in Poland, the museum's name points to the integral and transnational nature of the story... Jews were (and are) not only 'in' Poland' but also 'of' Poland." The Polin Museum, therefore, attempts to cover the 1,000 year history of Polish Jews, beginning with early medieval Jewish life and ending with post-Holocaust

Jewishness in Poland. "The museum is so unusual," writes Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, "because it was created from the inside out. The creators did not start with the building," which has been internationally recognized for its architecture, "and then think about the exhibition. They started with the story the museum would tell. That story would define the kind of institution the museum should be: a cultural and educational center dedicated to the history of the Polish Jews." One of the most remarkable things about the Polin museum is that it really does succeed in creating an expansive narrative without very many objects at all.






## THE POLIN MUSEUM CONT.

Its portrayal of the interwar Warsaw Jewish street, for example, is a blank, white hallway modeled after its historical inspiration, with ghostly projections of Yiddish street signs and Jewish storefronts. Perhaps the climax of the museum, this semi-real and yet entirely constructed model of Jewish life graces the cover of this magazine as one of the most interesting portrayals of Yiddishland that our class had the pleasure of experiencing. The museum itself was not only a visual but a spatial and tactile one. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that “only if the visitor moves does the story unfold,” which is true of the Polin Museum above all others on the subject of Jewish history. The museum is remarkably constructed to encourage visitors to interact with their surroundings. Fake books are everywhere with plastic pages, begging to be flipped through. Footprints and dance steps are printed on the floor of an interwar gallery room, asking visitors to dance.

At times, these forced spatial encounters feel manipulative, especially in the Holocaust exhibits. Once the visitor has arrived at the segment of the Museum dealing with the Holocaust, the rooms begin to become cramped and angular, walled with rusty metal. If the interwar street was supposed to be the climax of the museum and one of the most important definitions of Yiddishland, the Holocaust rooms are the most memorable galleries because of their attempted emotional manipulation. Visitors are made to imagine themselves jailed, uncomfortable, terrified by the intentional claustrophobic environment. Nevertheless, Helise Lieberman who met with our group after our tour of the museum, was quick to correct a young man from Colombia. “It’s not a Holocaust museum!” The Polin Museum was a satisfactory introduction to the contemporary Jewish institutions of Yiddishland because it was simultaneously a ghostly interpretation of Jewish life, due to its lack of objects, and an experience in mapping what Yiddishland meant across centuries and cities.





## VILNA GAON JEWISH STATE MUSEUM (VILNIUS)

The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in Vilnius is the only one comparable to the Polin Museum in Warsaw. Where the Polin Museum lacked in objects, the Vilna Gaon State Museum had them in plenty, perhaps an overwhelming amount. It has five branches: the Tolerance center, which contains “sacred, modern, and traditional art along with historical materials,” the Green House, a Holocaust exhibit, The Panaeriai Memorial dedicated to the Ponary Massacre, the Jacques Lipschitz Memorial Museum in Druskininkai, which exhibits Lipschitz’s lithographs, and the former Tarbut Gymnasium, which displays the history of Lithuanian Jews in the Interwar and Nazi period. The segment of the museum that we visited, the Tolerance Center, included various medieval artifacts, religious objects, and Holocaust (and post-Holocaust) artwork by survivors of the Vilna Ghetto. It was overwhelming after having experienced the Polin Museum.





## VILNA GAON JEWISH STATE MUSEUM CONT.

There was a clear opposition of priorities between the two museums: The Vilna Gaon State Museum had no interest in story telling, in contrast with the Polin museum which had no physical objects. So the Vilna Gaon State Museum asked an important question. Does a representation of Yiddishland need a story? If historical storytelling and ephemeral reconstructions of life and belongings in Yiddish can be a Yiddishland,

then wouldn't real objects from a thriving Jewish community also make a meaningful Yiddishland? Still, our group was far less enchanted or even energized by our encounter with the Vilna Gaon State Museum. This had nothing to do with prioritizing the imagination over objects, however, because the both the Ringelblum Archive (Warsaw) and the National Archives of Lithuania (Vilnius) managed to excite us more than the confused Vilna Gaon State Museum, and they were entirely centered around interacting with real objects.



## THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA

The National Library of Lithuania, according to the Lithuanian-Jewish Special Interest Group, preserves over 1,350,659 records of specifically Jewish nature, and while visiting we were introduced to many beautiful “finds” from their recently acquired Yiddish collection. The incredibly dedicated Lara Lempertas, the Chief Curator of the Judaica Research Section, curated a mini-exhibit specifically for our tour group, the first ever to be introduced to the contents of the new Yiddish materials. The recently excavated Book Chamber of the Strashun Library contained rare Hebrew and Yiddish books and documents, among them letters, memoirs, theater posters, photographs, pamphlets, political and religious tracts, and communal records. Because of these materials’ original source institution, YIVO’s, pre-war move to New York City, there has been some debate about the true owner and home of these documents. YIVO is the Yiddish Scientific Institute, a major American Yiddish institution that, before the war, was the home of very prominent Yiddish Lithuanian scholars. A recent agreement has been made between YIVO and the National Library of Lithuania to concede ownership of the documents to YIVO and to let them remain in the National Library, where Lara will keep watch over them and continue to comb through them for items of special historical or literary importance. While at the National Library, we witnessed how it was not only an important archive but a place of scholarly research and learning. Our professor Justin Cammy gave a lecture called “When Yiddish Was Young,” which had a large turnout of dozens of local scholars and interested persons.



וואָס מיר האָבן נישט געקענט אויסשרײַען  
פֿאַר דער וועלט

CZEGO NIE MOGLIŚMY WYKRZYCZEĆ ŚWIATU

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UNABLE TO SHOUT OUT TO THE WORLD

## THE RINGELBLUM ARCHIVES

The Ringelblum Archive was one of the most incredible academic institutions that we had the fortune of encountering on our trip. Constructed in a way that stands at the intersection of modern art and museum studies, the Ringelblum Archives' foyer opens up into a broad staircase. In Yiddish, surrounded by shattered brick, reads the phrase, "What we've been unable to shout out to the world" followed by Polish and English translations. This plaque looms over the entryway, the linoleum floors of which still bear the marks of the fire that threatened the integrity of the building during the war — notably, the building that houses the Ringelblum archives survived the decimation of Warsaw.

The entire space is designed to make visitors feel a personal connection with the texts, not unlike the Polin Museum in this way. However, the Ringelblum Archives, unlike the Polin Museum, has a collection of archival materials that puts it at the center of Yiddishland as academic and museum space. One of the most famous stories of the Holocaust is the story of the group founded by Emmanuel Ringelblum, who sensed the impending threat of liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and began to write literary records of their experiences. When our group walked up the stairs we were first introduced to a long, broad wood table with drawers that pulled out of it, each describing a member of Ringelblum's circle.





## THE RINGELBLUM ARCHIVES

Then, we were lead by a tour guide into the museum space which housed the archives themselves. The first thing one sees upon entering this room is the milk can. Perhaps one of the most famous objects in all of Holocaust history, this milk can (whose twin is in another museum, with a third one still missing) was the watertight container in which the vast majority of the Ringelblum Archives were kept, buried by Emmanuel Ringelblum and his underground colleagues on the eve of the Warsaw Ghetto destruction. The milk can is presented at the end of a long, tall hallway made of the same crushed brick

that surrounded the plaque in the foyer. This hallway engulfs the visitor, leaving them to encounter this solitary milk can face to face. The rest of the museum space logically and plainly displays the archives themselves, which are presented with their English translations. This archive uses the most effective parts of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum and the Polin Museum to their maximum potential. Artfully moving the visitor through an emotional journey while simultaneously presenting them with material objects, the Ringelblum Archive is the pinnacle of academic physical spaces as Yiddishland in contemporary Eastern Europe.





TSVISHN MAGAZINE  
DZIENNIK WIEWIORKI

## TSVISHN MAGAZINE

Although the project of the literary-art-academic magazine Tsvishn is no longer running, our group still had the pleasure of meeting with Karolina Szymaniak, its former editor. Tsvishn bridges the divide between Yiddish cultural and academic endeavors in the contemporary Yiddishland of Eastern Europe — a bilingual quarterly containing modern art and bilingual engagements with Yiddish culture and literature, it was successful engaging Polish and Polish-Jewish readers in Warsaw. Karolina Szymaniak describes herself on the Tsvishn website (<http://www.cwiszn.pl/en>) as “a researcher, editor, and language instructor with a PhD in literary and cultural studies,” so her work on Tsvishn is grounded in her academic work. In an interview with YIVO, where she has a scholarly position, she wrote that young students of both Polish and Jewish backgrounds “contribute to Tsvishn because they know it’s a magazine where they have a lot of freedom to do interesting work. It’s really a glossy magazine on high quality Yiddish art, culture, and literature.” Some of the themes of the pictured editions are Yiddish Berlin, Contemporary Yiddish Culture, Feminist Body Perspectives, and Yiddish in New York and Israel. She said in the same interview that she tries “to find ways to smuggle in academic material in clever and compelling ways to show the Polish audience what exists in the Yiddish world.” The title of the magazine is the Yiddish word for ‘between’ or ‘among,’ which is of major significance for the position of the magazine itself “in an intermedial space extending between different times and cultures.”

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# THE TWO BEST BUILDINGS IN CONTEMPORARY YIDDISHLAND



## THE POLIN MUSEUM

The Polin Museum stands, according to its website, “stark and aloof” on the site of a “once thriving district inhabited mainly by Jews, transformed by the Germans into the ghetto,” and shares its place with the memorial to the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. Designed by Finnish architectural office Lhdelma & Mahlamaki, the museum is said to symbolize “a gap in the 1000-year long history of Polish Jews” by way of the chasm that forms its interior, while simultaneously symbolizing new life with its view of nearby gardens and giant windows that let in streaming, natural light. The Polin Museum wins the second spot on our list of the most important Yiddish architecture of the Yiddishland of contemporary Eastern Europe.

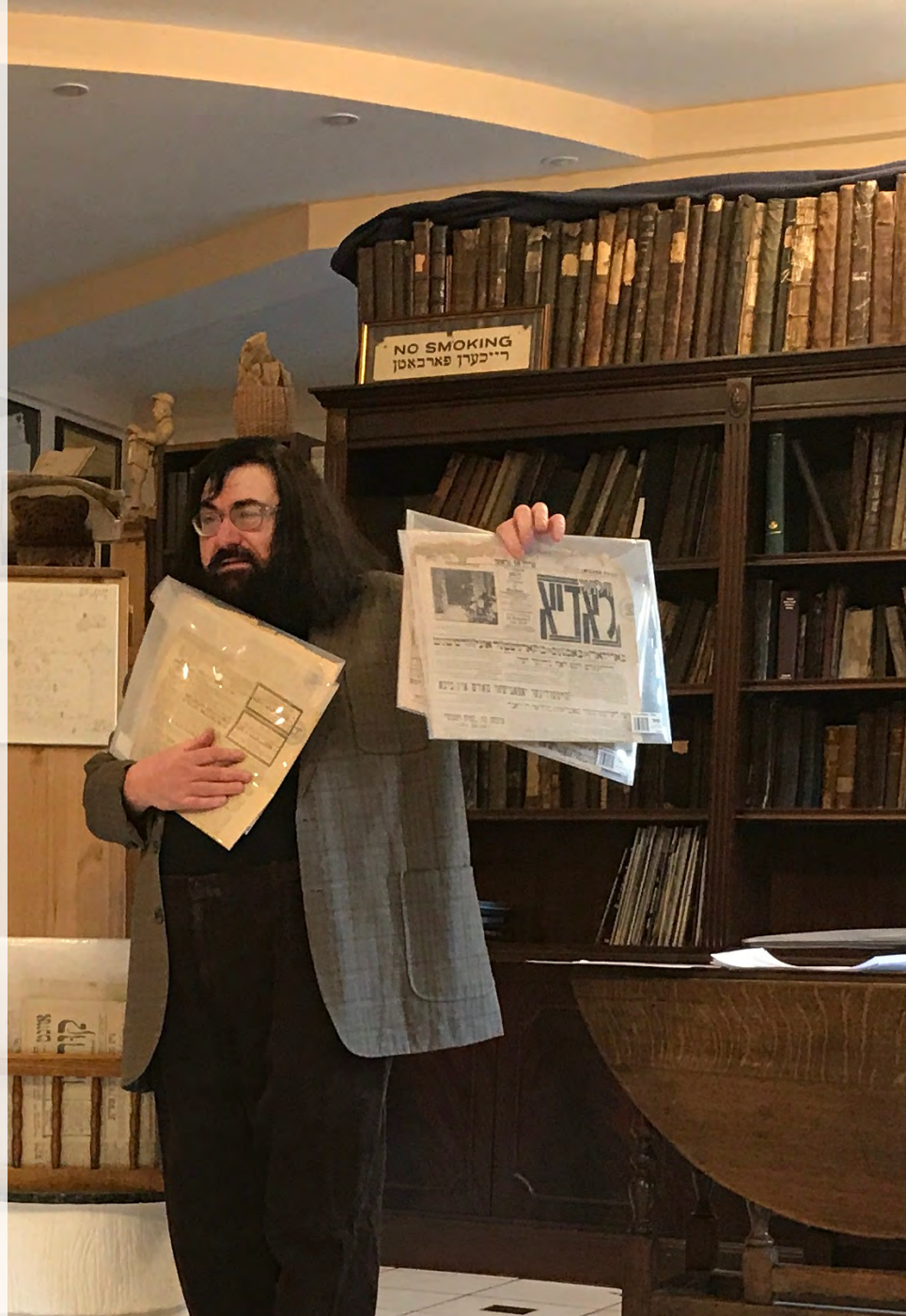


## ZLOTA 44

Designed by Jewish architect Daniel Libeskind, the Zlota 44 highrise is visible not only in stunning panorama from the top of the Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science, but from most streets in downtown Warsaw. Architecture Daily awarded Zlota 44 a spot as one of the best buildings of the year in 2016 when it was completed. Studio Libeskind wrote that “the wing shaped facade counters the Communist-era Palace of Culture situated directly across and represents a new Warsaw with great aspirations,” supposedly constructed to represent “the city and its people” as “the new icon of Warsaw.” Our tour guides mentioned that Libeskind designed Zlota 44 as an ode to his mother who supposedly lived on the street where it now stands, but if that is true Libeskind has left that off of all official websites with information on the building.



# Best Buildings in Yiddishland: Honorable Mention



## DOVID KATZ'S APARTMENT

Although Warsaw clearly has the upper hand in contemporary Jewish architecture, this magazine would be remiss not to mention one of the most incredible Yiddish buildings of our era: Dovid Katz's apartment. Filled to the brim with Jewish memorabilia, Yiddish literature, photos of his own adventures in Yiddishland, and snacks for peckish visitors, this cozy and yet somehow also incredibly

intimidating self-made museum space is a must-see for all visitors to Vilnius. Although it remains a little bit of unclear if Dovid Katz actually lives in this "apartment" — no bedroom was visible, only a small kitchen — the home office of [defendinghistory.org](http://defendinghistory.org) and the site of many an inspiring lecture deserves an honorable mention on this list of Yiddishland architecture.



# PROLOGUE

Ah, shades of the past  
Whose fountainheads scarce are behind  
us!  
Ah, beams intertwined  
With the net's bare hope of a haul...  
And the anguished heart asks:  
Is it over once and for all,  
Or is there more still ahead?  
And if so, how soon will the thread  
In the weave be made tight?  
Who can know on a fever-night?  
The jackal, or else the hyena...

**A NIGHT IN THE OLD MARKET PLACE**  
**Y.L Peretz, 1906**



A group of about ten people, mostly young adults, are standing in front of a building. The building has signs in Hebrew. One sign at the top says "SKLEP NAFTALION" and another below it says "PRIMA". The people are dressed in winter clothing like coats, scarves, and hats. They are all smiling at the camera. The background is slightly out of focus, showing the building's facade and a doorway.

# **DIGITALLY TOURING YIDDISHLAND**

“It is a paradox of the postwar era that, as Jewish Eastern Europe has become ever more remote, the desire not merely to imagine it but to pay it a visit has grown stronger....”

**JEFFREY SHANDLER**  
"IMAGINING YIDDISHLAND"





## DIGITALLY TOURING YIDDISHLAND

It is certainly one thing to talk about what Yiddishland is, another to talk about what there is to see in Yiddishland, but the mechanics of touring Yiddishland are different from any other trip you've ever taken. Part of the reason this is true is due to the digital, and how it has become an essential part of touring Yiddishland. This concept of the digital can be broken down further: How the virtual can become an aid for the tourist situated physically in Yiddishland, and how the virtual can become Yiddishland.

On our trip we had three local guides in addition to our Smith Professor. The first, Frank, carried an iPad with him religiously. It was where he stored pictures of Warsaw from the pre-war and wartime eras. He would pull it out at every opportunity, and had a habit of holding it out in front of the group so that we could see the direct comparison between the old and the new. What this meant was that our experience of Warsaw was layered — we were absorbed into the

Poland of the past while walking through the Poland of the now. Frank emphasized the ruin of Warsaw during the World War II over and over, and at every remaining ruin he would reliably have a picture of what the building had looked like when it was still standing. Given Warsaw's incredibly reconstructive efforts after the war, specifically of its Old Town, which had once been a medieval city. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the United Nations describes Warsaw's Old Town as a "meticulous reconstruction... with its churches, palaces, and market-place. It is an outstanding example of a near-total reconstruction of a span of history covering the 13th to the 20th century." An average visitor to Warsaw's Old Town would experience the overlay of present with past described here, but a visitor in search of Yiddishland is forced to encounter that simultaneity almost everywhere in Warsaw. Above, Frank is pictured showing us the site of the Warsaw Uprising.





## DIGITALLY TOURING YIDDISHLAND

### CONT.

There was also the suggestion of digital mapping. Outside 13 Tłomackie Street, the headquarters of the storied Association of Yiddish Writers and Journalists, someone made a suggestion that there should be a virtual map of Yiddishland, something akin to Google Maps. If this were the case, interested Yiddishland tourists could find important Yiddish historical sites in the digital and then see their modern reality in front of them. This suggestion opens the floodgates for a slew of questions. As Lydia Ivanovic's (Smith College Class of 2019) project "Mapping Out Yiddishland" shows, the internet is one of the best mediums for mapping out the history and geography of Yiddishland. However, if Ivanovic had added just one more layer to her project, images of the locations she mapped as they exist today, then the map suggested by a member of our crew would be essentially useless. This was a question we encountered often on our trip, and one that is at the heart of tourism in the age of information: why travel at all? What is gained from not just seeing a place but standing in front of it? Yiddishland has its own answers to these questions, as does every location, but they tend to be personal, rather than academic. What about the embodied act of traveling through Yiddishland is a must-do for the young academic in the era of Google Earth? These questions remained unanswered beyond the mysterious emotional satisfaction that comes to a young Yiddish scholar as they stand on historic ground, and the contemporary (not historical) institutions that stand in Yiddishland today.



A circular window, possibly from a train or a small plane, looking out onto a bright, hazy landscape. The window frame is visible, and the view outside is a soft, out-of-focus mix of light blues and greys, suggesting a distant horizon or a body of water under a pale sky.

## WHY YIDDISHLAND

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Michael Chabon, acclaimed author of “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay” and “The Yiddish Policemen’s Union,” wrote an article on the language book “Say It in Yiddish,” featured in this magazine on the first page. Titled, “The Language of Lost History,” the essay reads:

“Grief haunts every mile of the places to which the Weinreichs beckon. Grief hand-colors all the postcards, stamps the passports, sours the cooking, fills the luggage. It keens all night in the pipes of old hotels... The Weinreichs are, in effect, taking us to a Europe that might have been.”

It’s true that a certain amount of grief is always part of traveling to Yiddishland nowadays, especially the Yiddishland that is contemporary Eastern Europe. One never truly goes somewhere only for its past, however. We certainly didn’t.

To go to Yiddishland to mourn is not to appreciate it for what it was: a vibrant center of Jewish creativity and culture. It is also not to appreciate it for what it is: a hub of Jewish institutions with a wide variety of objectives, points of view, and experiences to offer to travelers in search of Yiddishland. That being the case, it is mandatory not to spend all your time in Yiddishland mourning, but instead living, doing, trying, staying in old and new hotels, buying all the postcards and kitsch you care to, eating the cooking, filling your luggage with souvenirs and new books to read. Rather than go to see the Europe that might have been with Yiddish, go to see the Europe that was with Yiddish and stands there now without it. Understand the the objects and lack thereof, the architecture and the memorials of and to Yiddish, not as a funeral but as a complex site of both the past and present. We did.



# JUSTIN CAMMY'S JEWISH STUDIES SEMINAR: YIDDISHLANDS 2018

