Throughout the last two decades, my husband and I have visited almost every Jewish community in the world. We have come across many tiny enclaves, vestiges of what they once were. That is what we found in Austria, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine, among others. This past summer we decided to tour Lita. As we traveled through Lithuania, from Riga to Vilna, we stopped at road signs pointing to Ponevezh and Telzai (Telshe), and saw no sign of Jewish life in what was once the cradle that nurtured the Lithuanian Torah world.

What we had seen in Latvia, or northern “Litvakland,” had somehow prepared us for our painful experience in Lithuania. Outside of Riga, we had seen the killing fields of the Rombula and Birzai forests. We had traveled (by car) the five miles from the site of the Riga ghetto along the road on which the Jews of Riga had been forcibly marched, in freezing weather, during the Holocaust. They had marched, guessing that they were to be taken to work camps. At a break in the trees, the column of marching Jews was forced to turn left, into the forest. And then they knew they were heading to their own murder site.

In Riga we had seen the great Choral Synagogue, which is now simply a monument to a few righteous gentiles who saved some Jews. Most of Latvia’s memorials attempt to describe how bad the Nazis were, followed by reports on the Evil Empire, the Soviet Union. The narrative conveniently blurs the participation of the local population in the brutal annihilation of more than 90 percent of their Jewish neighbors and the wanton theft of their property, thus far unrestituted.

We motored from Riga, Latvia, to Vilna, Lithuania, passing one picturesque village after another. We (our mechutanim Dr. and Mrs. Jacob Scherman, my husband, and I) had come to see Lita. This trip was to be our road to understanding the European-Jewish world that existed before World War II.
On a Magazin 7 Kislev 5773.

The building on the right once housed a Jewish girls’ school.

This antique postcard shows Wielka Street in Vilna, 1929.
We arrived in Vilna and hurried to prepare for Shabbos. We davened Kabbalas Shabbos at Taharas Hakodesh, popularly known as the Choral Synagogue, the city’s only pre-Holocaust synagogue that remains in use. A plaque at its entrance proudly informs visitors that this is the synagogue of the followers of the Vilna Gaon. There was a pitiful Jewish presence in shul, barely a minyan, made up mostly of very old Jews who had come to Vilna after the war, and a few tourists.

On Shabbos morning we davened with

Withold the Great and the Jews

GRAND DUKE WITHOLD turned the duchy of Lithuania into a multicultural empire that became a refuge for persecuted peoples from all parts of Europe. In 5149/1388-89, he issued a striking thirty-seven-article charter that bestowed on Jews such rights as free travel throughout the domain, legal protection equal to that of non-Jews, and much-improved economic rights and privileges. Jews were permitted to engage in all crafts, to own land, and to buy and sell anywhere, on equal footing with non-Jewish citizens.

Withold issued a charter that guaranteed the Jewish community’s right to purchase land for the building of prayer houses and a cemetery. These were unique concepts in fourteenth-century Europe, where religious freedom was almost unheard of, and they created the conditions for the development of active intellectual Jewish communities in Lithuania.
In a Magazin on Kislev 5773 the Chabad minyan, the only other minyan in town. It, too, had barely a quorum, including tourists, but it did have some new young followers of Chabad. The shul is housed in a new, privately funded building one block from the center of the Old Town. The building also houses a cheder, currently the only source of Torah education in Vilna, and a summer camp. The Chabad representative, Rabbi Shalom Ber Krasny, and his dedicated family fill the institution with optimism; whether or not it is justified has yet to be seen. Chabad is also the only provider of kosher meals in the city, and we were graciously served wonderful Shabbos seudos.

The Old Town of Vilna

Walking through Vilna’s ancient Old Town and the nearby site of the Jewish ghetto, you see a large street sign announcing “Gaon Street” (once called “Jew Street”). The sight of the street named for Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kremer, zt”l, the famed Gaon of Vilna, makes your heart beat faster. This is where the renowned rabbinic leader lived. Sadly, the present-day street is Jewish in name only.

As you proceed up the street and under an archway to the former site of the Great Synagogue and the famed Strashun Library, which is across the street from the site of the Goan’s kloiz, you see that it is lined with outdoor cafes and taverns where people gather to lounge boisterously, drink, and smoke.

At the end of the street lies the site of the house where the Gaon once lived. It was partially destroyed during the war, and the building was torn down completely during the postwar Communist era. It was replaced by a plaque and a statue of the Gaon sculpted in the image of the Communist philosopher Karl Marx!

The walk takes us to a modern building, a non-Jewish school, where the Rameilles Yeshivah stood before the Holocaust. Further on, a building in ruins is the site of a shul that once housed Ezras Nashim, the only free-loan society for women that existed in prewar Vilna. Faded Hebrew letters, barely visible, surround the rotting second-floor windows.

We see the building where Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, zt”l, lived, which now houses the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. The home of the world-renowned Romm Printing House, publishers of the Vilna Shas, is now a private dwelling. In what was the Jewish ghetto, in a courtyard of the wartime Judenrat office, we find a monument ironically named Flame of Hope, memorializing the tens of thousands of victims of the Vilna Ghetto.

The area has been gentrified and the Jews almost entirely eliminated. It is particularly saddening when one remembers the rich religious, cultural, intellectual, and political creativity that existed in this city and across Lithuania before the Holocaust, when, according to official estimates, some 245,000 Jews lived there. Vilna alone had about 50,000 Jews at its peak, with some 110 synagogues and ten yeshivos.

Early Jewish Communities

Historians date the origins of the Jewish communities of Lithuania to the time of the First Crusade in 4856/1096, when large numbers of French and German Ashkenazic Jews fled eastward. Over the years, the community grew gradually, despite restrictions on where Jews could live. Under the fourteenth-century rule of the visionary leader Withold the Great, conditions changed for the better. That is not to say that all was good for the Jewish population. The favorable
attitude changed suddenly in 1495 with the summary expulsion of all Jews from Lithuania and the appropriation of all their money and goods by the duchy’s treasury. The law remained in effect until 1503, when Jews were allowed to return and in some cases, reclaim their property.

During the sixteenth century several yeshivos flourished, including one in Ostrog, under its founder, Harav Dovid Segal Halevi (the Taz), zt”l; in Vladimir, under Harav Yitzchak Bezalel, zt”l; and in Kremnitz, headed by Harav Isaac Cohen, zt”l.

Council of Four Lands

The rapid development of Jewish settlement and economic activity was accompanied by expansion of local Jewish communal self-government. Every autonomous Jewish community was governed by its kahal, which organized and administered all internal activity and was responsible for tax collection, sanitation, and security.

The establishment in 1580 of the Council of Four Lands provided a communal body that dealt with taxes and economic and legal matters affecting all four regions of Poland and Lithuania. The council organized the subsidization by larger communities of education for the needy and yeshivah maintenance, and issued directives (takanos) that shaped family and communal life.

Among the official records of Pinkas Lita, we find that the council issued takanos against Jews playing cards or gambling, and against price-gouging for graves or burial services by the chevra kadisha. There were also takanos that controlled shidduchim, marriage, and divorce, including one that assigned fees for arranging a shidduch, according to the distance involved. A shtar shidduchim required the bride’s father to house and feed the young couple for five years after marriage, giving the chassan the opportunity to study Torah before being introduced into the world of business by his father-in-law. The takanos placed restrictions on how much time the young man was allowed to spend on non-Torah activities.

The council also carried out negotiations with central and local authorities through its shadlanim (liaison officers), who tried to influence decisions concerning Jews through their contacts with government authorities. For example, Jews had to contribute to the town’s defense preparedness. (In the Jewish Quarter, the most important defense structure was the fortified synagogue.) In the early sixteenth century, this meant that Jews were required to provide a contingent of soldiers for the duchy’s army, but through negotiations, this requirement was changed to the payment of dues, which sometimes meant cumbersome double taxation.

Pillaging, Pogroms, and Plagues

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a number of setbacks.

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Pillaging, Pogroms, and Plagues

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a number of setbacks.

The Alte Synagogue, built in the 1500s. The doorway on the right leads to the library.
Lithuania was involved in a series of wars and catastrophic events. Vilna was occupied by Russian forces, pillaged and burned, and its population massacred, nearly all Jews fled the city. Vilna was subsequently looted by the Swedish army.

The Jewish community gradually became impoverished, especially following the Chmielnicki pogroms of 1648, when a large amount of financial support was required to help refugees from the massacres.

An outbreak of bubonic plague killed about 35,000 residents, and a series of devastating fires in 1715, 1737, 1741, 1749, and 1749 destroyed whole sections of the city. Growth stopped for a time but the Jewish population rebounded, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century it had reached twenty thousand.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Vilna had a vibrant Jewish population, according to a Russian census, there were 64,000 Jews out of a total population of 154,500.

**Jewish Life Rebounds**

The quality of Jewish life in Lithuania was viewed with awe even by the great Napoleon himself. On his way to Moscow in 1812, Napoleon passed through Vilna. There he saw the same religious devotion and scholarly tradition that he had seen almost a decade earlier in Jerusalem during his conquest of the Middle East. He is reputed to have been the first to refer to Vilna as “Jerusalem of the North.”

Lithuanian Jewry’s spiritual life blossomed under the influence of the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797), one of the world’s greatest Jewish thinkers and Torah authorities. The Gaon’s students established a network of yeshivos in Lithuania and in what is today Belarus. The most important of these yeshivos was founded in Volozhin in 1802 by the Gaon’s most distinguished pupil, Harav Chaim of Volozhin, zt”l. There were other large yeshivos in Lithuania as well, in Vilna and in the towns of Bryansk, Kelm, Lomza, M ir, Novardok, Ponevezh, Radzyn, Slabodka, Slonam, Slutk, and Telšiai, to name a few.

Political authority in Lithuania fluctuated and alternated over the centuries. During certain periods it was an outpost of imperial Russia under Swedish sovereignty, at other times it was an independent kingdom or part of a Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth.

From the end of the Holocaust until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Lithuania was a small Soviet republic, part of the USSR. Today it is a minor Eastern European member of the European Union with fewer than three million citizens, only three thousand of whom are Jews — mostly elderly Holocaust survivors or immigrants from the Former Soviet Union with little or no knowledge of anything Jewish.
Lita Today

Today, as you travel through Lithuania, you are stunned by the absence of any trace of living Jewish presence. You can visit more than a hundred Jewish sites in the land of Harav Shabtai Hakohen (the Shach), whose commentaries now appear with those of the Taz alongside the text of the Shulchan Aruch; the land of Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, the Chazon Ish, the Chofetz Chaim, Harav Yosef Rosen (the Rogatchover Gaon), Harav Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk (the Ohr Samech), and Harav Avraham Danzig (the Chayei Adam); the many sites of the great yeshivos; the world-famous printing house of the Widow and Brothers Romm, the home of the Vilna Shas; the locus of the struggle between chassidim and misnagdim.

What you hear is the silence of the study halls — a heavy, blood-soaked silence. What you see are neglected cemeteries, mass-grave markers, plaques, memorials, and echoing empty buildings.

Vilna’s Jewish cemetery, twice relocated, contains the kever of the Gaon. He is said to be buried with the...
remains of the ger tzedek Avraham ben Avraham (Count Valentine Potocki), who, according to legend, was burned at the stake for converting to Judaism. In the same cemetery lies the kever of Harav Chaim Ozer. Nearby are the graves of the first victims of the Vilna ghetto and a memorial to the children of the ghetto. In the Kovno Jewish cemetery lies the kever of Harav Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor, zt”l, and those of other tzaddikim.

All are silent witnesses to the
devastation. You can see the grass-covered pits of mass graves in the Ponary Forest, today a public park where wild berries grow, edible mushrooms and herbs sprout, and imposing birch trees, pines, and cedars spread out in every direction. Between the paths where families with babies in carriages stroll, picnic baskets in hand, stretch the deep burial pits.

This is where seventy thousand Jewish voices were stilled by the Nazis and their volunteer Lithuanian helpers. Here, men and women were shot so that they would fall into the pits, while the murderers crushed the heads of children and babies in order to save bullets. Late in the war, to hide the evidence, the bodies were dug up and burned by other Jewish prisoners who were forced to remain in the pits, bound and shackled, until the work was done. The prisoners were then shot too. The empty pits remain, and a monument has been built to mark the deaths, but the local populace seemingly ignores them.

As you travel through the country, you can hear the screaming Jewish silence of Slabodka. You can see the killing fields of Forts Six and Nine, where thirty thousand Jews were murdered. Here, enthusiastic Lithuanian guards, in willing cooperation


They Didn’t Know

IN THE PUBLIC PARK AT PONARY we met a group of sixty young Jews from Belarus who were planning to move to Israel. So far, they knew very little of Jews or Judaism. They had come here with a yarmulke-wearing guide to remind them of their purpose. At this place of murder, they found a strong one. In the Kel Malei Rachamim that my husband recited, they learned for the first time that the perpetrators were “haNazim v’ozreihem hamekomiyim” — the Nazis and their local helpers.”

(Clockwise) 1. The place where Harav Elchanan Wasserman was shot. 2. Fort IX in Kovno. 3. The Ponary monument. 4. One of the pits into which Jews were shot in Ponary.
The Great Lithuanian Yeshivos

IN 1881 Harav Nosson Zvi Finkel, zt”l, the Alter of Slabodka, founded a novel type of yeshivah in a suburb of Kovno. The Slabodka yeshivah quickly became well known, and after the closing of the Vokohin yeshivah in 1892, it acquired an even more prominent role among Lithuanian yeshivos. Harav Finkel, a student of Harav Yisrael Saksanter, zt”l, was an adherent of the mussar movement. This movement taught that Talmud study required a systematic study of ethics, with the goal of developing trained Talmudists who were highly ethical young men.

Money for the upkeep of the various yeshivos and for scholarships for needy students was raised by traveling fundraisers, who were sent as far away as the United States. The Slabodka yeshivah had collected enough money in the U.S. to complete a new building in 1941. Tragically, it was open for only several days because Lithuanian volunteers, with unspeakable cruelty, carried out a Nazi-organized massacre in Slabodka that year, marking the end of Jewish life in Lithuania. The building still stands, but it is now a sewing machine factory.

The yeshivah in Mir, in what was then Lithuania, also saw its golden age during this period with the appointment of Harav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, zt”l, as Rosh Yeshivah. The yeshivah’s reputation grew, attracting students from all over Europe and as far away as America, South Africa, and Australia; at its peak it had almost five hundred students. By the time World War II broke out, there was hardly a Lithvish yeshivah in Lithuania that year, marking the end of Jewish life in Lithuania. The building still stands, but it is now a sewing machine factory.

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The Talmud study halls would serve as fortresses against the ideologies sweeping Europe from west to east. They were meant to bolster faith and encourage Jewish study as an antidote to the Haskalah, the so-called Enlightenment, a movement that spawned Reform Judaism, and to the general weakening of religious Jewish patterns by Zionism, socialism, and the other “isms” spreading across the continent.

Traditional Judaism was also fighting a battle against the governing bodies of Russia and Lithuania that welcomed the ideas of the Haskalah and viewed the yeshivos as obstacles that stood in the way of modernization. These struggles became moot in Lithuania in 1941. The battles, the vibrancy, the bubbling of dissenting voices that made up Jewish Lithuania, the Yiddish, the Torah study, the philosophy we call “Litvish,” all ended in Lithuania with the Holocaust.

By 1945, despite the miracle of the rescue of some of Lithuania’s best Torah through the intervention of the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara and the remarkable story of the Mirrer Yeshivah’s escape to Shanghai, no one imagined that the remnants of Lithuanian Jewry would rebuild Torah in America, Israel, and elsewhere. Litvish Jews have given Telzhe and Vilna and Novarodok a renewed voice wherever they live today.

During the Holocaust, it would have also been difficult to imagine that Chabad, a group our enemies did all in their power to eradicate, would today have sheluchim all over the world. It is also comforting to know that the small number of survivors from what was once Jewish Lithuania have become the rabbis, teachers, and Rebbe Yeshivas of today’s yeshivah world.

This is the most fitting memorial to what was once Jewish life in Lithuania.

Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara.