

## **Vilnius Yiddish Institute Summary Report**

Program in Jewish Studies, Rice University

Eli Spector, Summer 2011

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, approximately 250,000 Jews called Lithuania their home, and Vilnius their “Jerusalem.” Nearly 50 percent of the Jewish population lived in the capitol city, which housed more than a hundred active synagogues and printed six Jewish newspapers daily. And the primary language of these Jewish establishments was, of course, Yiddish: a Slavicized but fundamentally Germanic language with traditional Hebrew and Aramaic elements. Yiddish was the preeminent Jewish language of the twentieth century, spoken by more Jews than any other language in history including modern Hebrew in the present day. At its height, Vilnius’ Yiddish community influenced modern Jewish culture and literature as well as contributed to the then-burgeoning American Jewish and Zionist identities. In June of 1941, however, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, then under Soviet control, fell to invading Nazi forces. By the end of the year, 50,000 Jews, mostly from Vilnius, were shot dead by the *Einsatzkommando*. A year later, 190,000 more, or 95 percent of the total Jewish population, had too been murdered. A mere 3,000 Jews are estimated to live in Lithuania today, fewer than the number of post-war survivors alone. There was indeed, and still remains, no other country as proportionally devastated from Holocaust as Lithuania.

The Vilnius Yiddish Institute is largely a tribute to the past — perhaps part of a far-flung dream in which a resurrected Jewish Quarter in Vilnius roars with the cadence of Yiddishisms from a forgotten time. The summer program was in fact held at Oxford University until 1996 at which time it moved. The city of Vilnius did serve as a historical backdrop to our work in the classroom, but it certainly did not complement it like it may have seventy years ago. Nevertheless, the summer program is as strong as ever in its new hometown: over sixty students and scholars from Europe and the Americas descended on this year's session, each bringing with them a rich personal stake in the Yiddish language and deep desire to learn more.

Classes were held five days per week from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm. A short conversation break at 11 am brought together students from different levels, which facilitated learning among students from all backgrounds. After formal classes concluded for the day, cultural activities began after lunch. These included Yiddish music workshops, lectures, tours, and various outings around Lithuania. Though I entered the program as a beginner, this combination of classroom and cultural study accelerated my learning quite a deal.

I encountered a few surprises in the program. Yiddish's relationship to German, for example, was much stronger than I had anticipated. (It's nearly a German dialect written in Hebrew script with some Hebrew cognates.) This in mind, it was surprising how relatively simple the Yiddish grammar is. The readability and pronunciation of the language was also

straightforward. In addition, I was surprised by the diverse interest in the language. People of many different ethnicities and religions came to Vilnius to study Yiddish for work on their doctorates, to reconnect with their roots, and of otherwise sheer interest of the language. It is true that Yiddish no longer rules the Jewish speaking world like it once did, but by no means is it irrelevant to it. Much of the Jewish literature of the twentieth century has yet to be translated to useable form suitable for research, for example. In other ways, Yiddish holds profound meaning for families in Jewish Hasidic communities and those whose parents or grandparents spoke it at home, often as a first language. Indeed, today Yiddish may not be a thriving language, but this summer in Vilnius, interest in it was alive and well.

More photos: [elispector.zenfolio.com/lithuania](http://elispector.zenfolio.com/lithuania)

