CONVERSATION WITH... Dovid Katz

By Cindy Mindell

WESTPORT – Dovid Katz is one of the world’s foremost Yiddish scholars and authors. Co-founder of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University in Lithuania, Katz has found that it is impossible to try to revive Yiddish language and culture without encountering old and new antisemitism. In addition to his scholarly work, Katz races against time to locate, interview, and support the last Holocaust survivors throughout Eastern Europe.

On the occasion of the publication of a second edition of his 2004 folio, “Lithuanian Jewish Culture,” the former Yale professor spoke with the Ledger about his work in what was once considered “the Jerusalem of Lithuania.”

Q Describe your work to find the Jews of pre-World War II Eastern Europe. How did this project begin and what are its objectives?

A: I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1956, and grew up in a home steeped in Yiddish culture; my father was the Yiddish and English poet Menke Katz. I majored in Yiddish linguistics at Columbia before relocating to England where I did my doctorate on the origins of Yiddish at London University, and started the Yiddish program at Oxford. After a stint at Yale, I took up my present position as professor at Vilnius University in Lithuania.

The project began with my first visit to Lithuania and Belarus in 1990. After many years of teaching Yiddish, I decided to become a Yiddish student myself, realizing that we must all learn as we can from the last generation of survivors. Because of the Holocaust they are now really the end of the line. This objective developed into an archive and into a new language and culture atlas (the first thirty or so maps are on my website, www.dovidkatz.net). I moved the old Oxford University summer program to Vilnius in 1996, and then settled in the city myself to take up a new chair of Yiddish and Judaic studies. One of the primary ideas of the project was to enable students from all over the world to come and “breathe in” the most bona fide Yiddish and East European Jewish culture our planet has to offer. I followed up in 2001 by co-founding, with Mendy Cahan of Tel Aviv, the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, where I have been serving as research director ever since.

A second objective is to help these poor survivors who often live out their last years, effectively at “the scene of the Holocaust,” in poverty with substandard incomes. When I met Zane Buzby of Los Angeles and told her about the problems she went on to find the Survivor Mitzvah project which has helped many hundreds of elderly survivors. I’ve also worked very closely in Vilnius with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that does such magnificent work.

Q What is the “Holocaust Oblfuscation Movement” and how does it affect your work?

A: The Holocaust Oblfuscation movement, as I’ve called it, is a movement by the governmental, intellectual and media establishments of East European countries, particularly the Baltics, to try to rewrite history, in effect, claiming that there were in fact “two equal genocides,” Nazi and Soviet, and, as far as possible, blaming “the Jews” for Soviet rule and misrule. Without denying a single death – it’s not “Holocaust Denial” – the Obluscationists explain the history as two equivalent wrongs. This goes hand in hand with a virulent strain of East European antisemitism that literally blames the Jews for communism and uses the canard to effect, claiming that there were in fact “two equal genocides.” In September 2008, a horrific piece of antisemites’ desired new history of “two equal genocides.” In September 2008, I launched a website to cover all these issues, www.HolocaustInTheBaltics.com, which I keep separate from my personal website, www.dovidkatz.net that concentrates on my life’s work in Yiddish studies.

The status of Yiddish had been growing for years in Vilnius because of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, but the recent campaign, spearheaded by elitist antisemitic elements, to rid our institute of staff who speak up for Jewish causes, has been a major blow. We don’t yet know the end of the history.

Q Have you witnessed any antisemitic response to the Vilnius Yiddish Institute or the SLS Jewish Lithuania Program?

A: There has been a major antisemitic effort to purge these institutions of those staff members who speak up on behalf of Holocaust survivors, and against the “prosecutors” campaign against these survivors and efforts to write the Holocaust out of European history. A great shame, because Vilnius has such enormous potential to again become a major multicultural city on the borderlands of East and West.


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