

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 1998, 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 found 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.



**FORMER YALE PROFESSOR
REVIVES YIDDISH
CULTURE IN VILNIUS**

Q What is the "Holocaust Obfuscation Movement" and how does it affect your work?

A: The Holocaust Obfuscation 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 Obfuscationists 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 in its effect explain away the Holocaust. 2008 was a watershed year. On May 5, two armed police came looking for our institute's librarian, Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky, now 87, as part of a campaign by prosecutors and politicians to defame Holocaust survivors who joined the Nazi resistance, as part of the "double genocide" movement and the perceived need to generate a bogus paper trail of "equal investigation." They were also looking for Rachel Margolis, now 88, who like Fania survived the Vilna Ghetto before fleeing into the forests of Lithuania to join the anti-Nazi resistance. Margolis, a biologist turned historian, lives in Rehovot, Israel, and cannot return to spend the summer months in her native Vilnius for fear of further harassment by prosecutors. They went after her because she discovered a long-lost diary by a Christian Polish

witness to the murder of tens of thousands of Vilna Jews by enthusiastic local Lithuanian militiamen. She deciphered and published it in the original Polish. Yale brought out an English edition in 2005.

I decided I could no longer remain silent, and alerted my good friends in the Western diplomatic community in Vilnius. The response was overwhelming. The Irish ambassador made Fania a banquet, the American ambassador gave her a huge certificate of merit, and the British ambassador organized a historic walk through the Vilna Ghetto territory attended by representatives of 15 NATO nations.

Since then, the antisemitic establishment has been trying hard to "persuade" me to leave town, and of course they may succeed, not least with academic intrigues related to my professional status and income. But I shall all my life be proud that I did not remain silent. I spoke up for the last Holocaust survivors when a far-right antisemitic establishment started a campaign against them, and I'm now proud to be part of the efforts in Europe to counter the 2008 "Prague Declaration," a horrific piece of Euro-legislation that would in effect legislate the Holocaust out of European history books and replace it with the antisemites' desired new history of "two equal genocides." In September 2009, 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.

For more information on Dovid Katz's work, visit www.dovidkatz.net and www.HolocaustInTheBaltics.com.

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