

## LITVAK HERITAGE COUNCIL: MISSION STATEMENT (draft proposal)

The Litvak Heritage Council seeks to reclaim for the Independent Republic of Lithuania the richness of our Jewish heritage, tragically destroyed and now almost entirely lost to us. Beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish culture became so eminent among us that Vilnius was known as ‘Jerusalem in Lite’, the home of renowned scholarship in the midst of thriving commercial and artistic endeavours. We are acutely aware of how this culture and 96% of our Jewish population were destroyed by the Nazi regime, aided by local collaboration, and further by Soviet occupation that for almost half a century closed off any authentic appreciation and understanding of our history.

We believe that this heritage is ours, and would like to reclaim it on all levels – historic, cultural, artistic and religious. We believe also that contemporary, free and independent Lithuanian culture will be immeasurably enriched by this long-overdue addition to our society, and that once again we can be a home for Jewish enterprises of all kinds.

We are a varied group: scholars and academics, historians of various kinds, artists, government officials, people in finance and public policy. We are Jewish and non-Jewish, Baltic, Litvak, Liberal and Conservative, and come from all walks of life. We are tied to no particular ideology, government party, or religion. But we share one goal: To bring back to independent Lithuania an authentic appreciation and comprehension of the Jewish culture that for many centuries flourished in our midst.

In this light, we hope to:

- foster accurate historical research on Jewish life in Lithuania, not only during the tragic events of the Holocaust itself, but in the centuries preceding;
- conduct seminars and historical symposia on the richness of our vanished Lithuanian-Jewish heritage;
- without equating the horrors of Nazi genocide with Stalinist oppression, to encourage dialogue on these often-competing narratives;
- combat anti-Semitism;
- enhance the instructional value of the Genocide Museum to include fuller displays on the Nazi genocide (and local collaboration) against Lithuanian Jews;
- provide accurate and authentic responses to current troublesome flashpoints in our relationship to Jews worldwide, including matters of restitution, war crimes trials and judicial authority;
- reclaim as part of our Lithuanian literary heritage, great Yiddish writers such as I.B. Singer, Chaim Grade, and Avrom Sutzkever;
- celebrate aspects of Jewish culture today that we believe will have popular appeal, in music, film, visual and performance art, poetry and (of course) food. In this regard, we hope to have a yearly festival of Litvak culture modeled on the annual Jewish festival in Cracow.

Our Litvak Heritage Council is open, not closed. While we are committed to the goals above and have already implemented many of them, or have begun to, there is much yet to do. We encourage participation by all: Litvaks everywhere, native Lithuanians of all persuasions, and our friends abroad in the USA, Europe and Israel. We do not shy away from dissent, nor are any queries out of bounds. We will surely make mistakes, but they will stem not from any residual anti-Semitism but from the complexities of our culture and our history. Our purpose is to move forward with integrity. We look to a shared Lithuanian-Jewish future of accurate historical knowledge and festive celebration, and with it we will embrace a richer sense of national identity and national pride.

Some possible links:

- Vygaudas Usackas' speeches in Israel, at the conference on anti-Semitism in December 2009;
- The local defense of those speeches by Barry Rubin;
- The eulogy of Avrom Sutzkever in Israel in February 2010, by Darius Degoutis;
- Emmanuelis Zingeris' address to Parliament on Sutzkever, with a note about the observation of a moment of silence in Sutzkever's honor;
- The Vilnius Yiddish Institute
- Photos of Fania (?) celebrating her birthday with President Adamkus
- The Tolerance Museum
- A study-guide or list to books on Lithuanian-Jewish history
- YIVO (with, I hope, an address by the Director, Jonathan Brent)