

Antisemitism in the 21st Century Shtetl

By Professor Dovid Katz

The words “antisemitism in the shtetl” might evoke recollections of Fiddler on the Roof, a touch of family lore “from the old country” way back when, or for those familiar with modern Yiddish literature, a scene from this or that writer.

Baffling as it may sound, however, it a substantial contemporary topic in the study of antisemitism, and, perhaps even more surprisingly, part of a phenomenon with implications for the future, given the vast number of cities, towns and villages in the world with a rich Jewish history but no living Jews, where potent anti-Jewish feeling (as well as pro-Jewish feeling) can be observed.

As noted back [in Flashpoint 21](#), antisemitism in Eastern Europe is very different from its much better known Western and Middle East incarnations. It is a nonviolent movement that often emanates from elites with lavish government budgets at their disposal, who are determined to rewrite Holocaust history in the spirit of the new far-right. Its adherents often despise the remaining, precariously weak and sometimes-shrinking Jewish communities of the region, while heaping unbridled praise and sundry favors upon useful Western and Israeli Jews who may naively be recruited. Major elements of the new Holocaust revisionism, known as

Double Genocide, include the posited “equality” of Nazi and Soviet crimes, the glorification of Holocaust collaborators, and the vilification (and attempted prosecutions) of Holocaust victims (perished and survivors alike) who joined the anti-Nazi partisan resistance in the forests as being “war criminals” for the history books of future generations.

It is both natural and necessary that institutions dedicated to the study and unmasking of antisemitism (and all forms of racism and prejudice against fellow humans) emphasize studies and events that will combat our decade’s two major — and deadly — international purveyors of antisemitism: Islamist jihadism and the (primarily West European) suave far left that vilifies Israel and its supporters to the absurd point of seeking out “good” Jews who are, in its view, sufficiently negative toward Israel. Still, the study of contemporary antisemitism needs to find ways and means of fathoming many of its other, and understudied, manifestations.



Millions of people throughout Eastern Europe live today in a town that was once a *shtetl*. The Yiddish word, itself historically a diminutive of *shtot* (‘city’), pluralizes to *shtétlakh*, but English has nativized the plural to *shtetls*. A shtetl was not just any old town. True, there are no universally agreed parameters, but we can here safely go with this: an East European town or village with a considerable proportion of Yiddish-speaking Jews in its population, usually for centuries, concentrated around the town center, up until the Holocaust; one with a central square or open market area with one or more churches and synagogues in or near that square or market. These distinguish it from the smaller *dorf* or *yishev* (‘hamlet’ or ‘small village’). Shtetlness is in fact the default for much of East European Yiddish culture, with the hamlet dweller being marked as a *yishúvnik* or *dórfsh-yid*, and the big-city person attracting the epithet *a shtótishe(r)*.

In the consciousness of many Western Jews with shtetl born-and-raised parents, grandparents and forebears, there was, in many cases, a late twentieth century shift away from feelings of shame at less-than-Long-Island ancestry to a romanticization of a world that was starting to disappear even in memory, along

with the last generations of prewar emigrés and Holocaust survivors. Important anthologies of Yiddish fiction in English translation were published over the years by, among others, Irving Howe & Eliezer Greenberg, Hillel Halkin, Eli Katz, Joseph Leftwich, Joachim Neugroschel, and Ruth Wisse. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl* continues to inform many of the non-fiction studies.

For around twenty-five years, working closely with dedicated colleagues, I have traveled through hundreds of erstwhile shtetls in Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia (and to a lesser extent, northeastern Poland and eastern Ukraine) looking for The Last of the Mohicans, for a (slow-moving, modest, unfunded) dialectological atlas of the northern (Litvak) areas of Jewish Eastern Europe. But we also heard and recorded the Holocaust-related memories of these last-in-their-shtetl Jews, and often asked the following question: "What would you like to see here a hundred years hence?" Almost invariably, the answer includes the following: A memorial tablet of one kind or another right in the middle of town about the history of the town's Jews including what happened to them. When we would come back with "What do you think about the big beautiful memorial in the forest at the mass grave site?" the answers were almost always in the spirit of "Sure, very nice, especially for the rich Jews from abroad who come once a year or whenever to get photographed with our glorious politicians, but people from the town and people visiting the town itself will never know about the Jews who lived here, when they came, how many they were, what they gave this town or the world, and exactly how they all at once disappeared from the face of the earth."

It is not seldom the case that the laser-sharp points made by Holocaust survivors merit the attention even of accomplished scholars and organizational leaders and politicians who nowadays make a lot of hay from Holocaust remembrance events, ceremonies, and medals.



Let us now turn from Jewish survivors' discourse to antisemitic parlance. Over the same quarter century we have often heard from (friendly, hospitable) folks in

former shtetls in Lithuania and Latvia narratives along the lines of: “Look, we have nothing against anybody, but those Jews who were here before the war were communists, they sold our country to Moscow, they participated in the Soviet genocide against our people in 1940, and then, sure, the Nazis, in 1941, found, as they did everywhere, local scum to do their dirty work. But 1940 comes before 1941, right? But look, if the rich Jews from America, Israel, and South Africa and everywhere else want to build a huge monument in the forest and go there every year, sure, why not? The birds certainly like it. Hey, and please, let them start investing here too, but please don’t tell us what to do or say in the center of our own town.”

Alas, many towns in Lithuania, like its larger cities, continue to sport street names, public plaques, school names and museum exhibits honoring the local Holocaust collaborators, or indeed killers, of 1941, on the grounds that they were “anti-Soviet rebels.” Actually, nearly all the East European Holocaust killers were “anti-Soviet.” Contrary to local nationalist misinformation, these locals did not drive out the Soviets, who were in fact fleeing from Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa, the largest invasion in human history, launched on 22 June 1941. But local museums that make “national heroes” of the nationalists who started butchering their defenseless Jewish neighbors (often starting with young women and old rabbis) before the first German soldiers even got there are capable of fooling naive foreign visitors, even reporters from the New York Times or the San Francisco Examiner. One tireless, patriotic and courageous Lithuanian campaigner, Evaldas Balčiūnas, who does not want to see his beloved country honor murderers, has exposed more and more of the collaborator-honoring public infrastructure. But instead of getting the medal he deserves, whether from his own country or one of the international Jewish organizations, he has been lugged into court here in Vilnius for years on ridiculous charges intended to deter others from speaking up (finally to be found “not guilty” last summer, after years of harassment). There have been many other bold Lithuanian truth tellers, all patriotic citizens, in the quarter century since independence.



But that is only one side of the coin. The other concerns the actual programs for commemorating a former shtetl's former Jewish community. And, over the years, we've seen it all.

In one former shtetl, a foundation set up (with funds from Jewish properties) went ahead and enabled tearing down the old and for generations-beloved town-center synagogue building in return for funds for a lavish memorial out in the forest and other projects. All blessed by foreign Jewish big-wigs from South Africa lavishing photo-ops at a posh ceremony where we all got fancy bags with a brick from the demolished prayerhouse to take home as a souvenir (in 2011).

Another former shtetl that finally (in 2015) put up an informational sign up at the site of the former synagogues also left "in peace" the huge swastika-worshipping monument in the town square with no addition of some modern comment. To be sure, it is a pre-Nazi swastika from the 1920s, but given the annihilation of a majority of that same town's residents "under" that precise symbol, some curatorial comment would be on the sensitive side. Instead, our host from the local government proudly noted that the town's prewar swastika was prominently cited in the court case that got swastikas legalized in Lithuania back in 2010.

Then there is a former shtetl where in addition to lavish sculptures at the mass grave site, an original monument was in fact erected in the town center. Bizarrely, it is of a girl in her early teens, accompanied by a sign in Lithuanian, English and Yiddish that reads "For Sheduva Jews." But which and what Jews, from when and how many, what did they contribute, and at whose hands did they come to disappear from the face of the town all at once?

But there have been towns where deeply dedicated local humanists have managed to break through to the quick. One actually bears a town-center plaque that concisely cites the vintage of the Jewish community, the totality of the number butchered in 1941, and the mention of local collaborators (in a multitude of towns, local volunteer "patriots" from all walks of life constituted the vast majority of the shooting squads). In another town, the truth of the history — including local collaboration — has become part of a sensitive annual remembrance ceremony thanks in no small part to courageous local councilors and educators.



That was all by way of introduction, so to speak, to a recent event that has attracted vastly more than usual media coverage for shtetl commemorations. This time around, a typical Lithuanian shtetl got an atypical commemoration. That shtetl, in northeastern Lithuania, is Malát (in Yiddish; its current official Lithuanian name is Molėtai). Its two thousand Jews were murdered on 29 August 1941. Not a single one was rescued by a righteous local, though there were some rescues in nearby villages by inspirationally brave people. They were murdered, under German Nazi auspices, by several dozen local enthusiastic shooters (in other words, neighbors of the victims with whom they'd lived all their lives) of a wide array of professions, including post office manager, teachers and students (not the “dregs and drunkards of society” proffered by the apologists). The genocide was observed, as usual for such towns, by an SS officer, a German photographer, and an official translator.

Malát's victims were to have a somewhat “different 21st century fate” from those of thousands of other shtetls in Eastern Europe because of the initiative of two second generation Holocaust survivors who were born in Vilnius after the war. One is Tzvi (Hirsh) Kritzer, a successful soccer player agent in Israel who launched a “think big” project last year (march, rally, monument, exhibition, film, book, an ongoing foundation), focused on the massacre's 75th anniversary, which fell this year on 29 August 2016. He avoided the pitfall of speaking “only to the official Jews” here and consulted freely with everyone in town, not least bold Lithuanian historians who have stood up for the truth. He partnered with another second-gen survivor whom he had known as a boy in postwar Vilnius, the famous master piano educator Leon (Liova or Leybke) Kaplan. Kaplan settled in Washington DC where he founded the Washington Conservatory of Music and was much honored for his work. He returned to live in his native Vilnius over a decade ago. Both 2016 partners in the memorialization of a parent's shtetl are on the planet because on 29 August 1941 those parents were not in town. Kritzer's father Tsódik had already fled to the Soviet Union (the only realistic hope of survival for any Jew in the country); Leon's mother Hínde was at the time living in Kaunas (Kovno).

This year's 29 August memorial event was the largest-ever voluntarily attended Holocaust memorial event in the history of modern Lithuania ("voluntarily" is used here in contradistinction to events where government employees or school children are "pressed into service"). The event itself attracted over a thousand people (the most conservative estimate, some estimate more than double that figure). Most were Lithuanians who came from the capital, Vilnius (historic Vilna). It seems from onsite interviews that a very high percentage of them was inspired to come by two remarkable, stark, unforgettably right-to-the-gut articles by a famed Lithuanian playwright born in the town, Marius Ivaškevičius ("Jews: The Curse of Lithuania," last May; and "I am not a Jew," in August, days before the commemoration event). The playwright was himself recruited to the cause, in turn, by the deeply committed and courageous head of the local regional museum, Viktorija Kazlienė, a widely-admired personality for whom seeking, telling and then professionally depicting (via museum science) The Simple Truth is the highest ideal, in stark contrast to so many museum heads in the Baltics and beyond. In other words, the proverbial stars lined up for a team of local and non-local truth tellers, Lithuanians and Jews in blessed partnership, to do this together, with the star power of playwright Ivaškevičius (pronounced ee-vash-KAH-vih-tshus) drawing the critical mass necessary for something to turn into a bona fide national event rather than the type of PR connivance that predominates in the region.

Using modern tools for expressing empathy for individual victims one did not personally know, Lithuanian people carried large posters each with a photograph of an individual victim, and in some cases, of rescuers from different parts of the region who did save a neighbor. Various of the speakers dealt honestly with the identity of the murderers and the place where they came from. But only Leon Kaplan, of all the speakers, dared in his speech to break the taboo on criticizing the multiple memorials for perpetrators in the country: "I do not want to see streets, schools and squares named after those whose bloody hands participated in the mass murder. Just the opposite: I would like to see the names of the local people who saved a neighbor, the Righteous of the Nations, immortalized in the names of streets, schools and squares in our Lithuania."

At the same time, it is necessary to be frank about the dark forces that came to light during preparations for the event. The state-sponsored “Genocide Center” in Vilnius tried hard to prevent the organizers from citing the correct number of victims, around 2,000, on the large multilingual monument unveiled at the event, insisting on the “politically corrected” number of 700. But Mr. Kaplan fearlessly went right over their heads, up and down the government, to ensure that the antisemitic Genocide Center would on this occasion fail ignominiously. As ever, photo-op famished political figures and ambassadors used the occasion for “Mount Rushmore” style PR photos (hours before any of the participants actually gathered). An array of players, some with great achievements and some not, rushed to take credit for the event, and some of that comes out in some of the hyperbolic accounts to be found in some parts of the media coverage). Politicians who attended included two signatories of the 2008 Prague Declaration, the “constitution” of the far right’s Double Genocide movement in Eastern Europe. Incredibly, the honored guests included a Catholic priest who declares that the perpetrators were also victims, as per the typical apologetics of the local obfuscators, and a national leader of the Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church who has yet to even answer any of the calls over the years asking for removal of the steps to his own central Vilnius church which are all made of pilfered Jewish gravestones, some with stubbornly defiant old Jewish letters quite readable (in other words, you have to trample Jewish gravestones to enter the church). Various of the officials in attendance are supporters of plans for a central Vilnius Congress Center in the heart of the old Jewish cemetery, surrounded by remains of many thousands of Vilna Jews whose families purchased their burial plots between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. That wouldn’t be the case if those were Christian graves, as bold Christian theologians have accurately pointed out.

Then there was a most memorable twist in the 2016 story of Malát. Earlier this year, the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s chief Nazi-hunter, Efraim Zuroff, working with Lithuanian author and political public relations specialist Ruta Vanagaitė, (they are coauthors of an important book on the Lithuanian Holocaust), exposed plans afoot in *today’s* Molėtai to go ahead and rename a street in memory of a local priest who rushed enthusiastically to assemble the murder squad of his town’s

Jews (the squad of killers included his brother). The episode was reported in a *Jerusalem Post* article by the intrepid Sam Sokol, who continues to defy the Western media's curtain of silence over East European Holocaust-collaborator glorification (especially concerning Ukraine). That priest, Jonas Žvinys, is a relative and namesake of the current mayor of Molėtai, Stasys Žvinys. In his own speech at the August 29th event, the mayor spoke appropriately about his town's murdered Jews. But it seems that nobody had bothered, or is bothering, to hold him to account for failing to utter the one sentence that would matter: "I oppose any and all efforts to name streets for the collaborators and perpetrators of the Holocaust in our town, or any town, even if it is a relative of mine." (One rumor circulating is that to avoid the "Wrath of the Jews" the Holocaust collaborating priest will be honored in a nearby village, perhaps Dubingiai, until the "time is right" for it to pass unnoticed in Malát / Molėtai itself.)



To return to the future of commemorations of the annihilated shtetl Jewry of Eastern Europe, it is vital that a set of standards be debated to avert the abuse of such commemorations by a variety of players ranging from the sincere and naive to the antisemitic and canny. Our own proposals, rooted in those of Holocaust survivors over the years, are starkly simple: First, that there be a modest information board in the *center of town* containing the basic information on the origins, history, achievements and numbers of the erstwhile Jewish community and how they came to suddenly disappear, with prominent mention of local participation in the town massacre where that was the case. Second, rapid and voluntary removal of the names of Holocaust collaborators and perpetrators from street-names, monuments, museum exhibits and other publicly funded means of glorifying national heroes. You can't remotely be sincere about remembering the victims when you honor their killers, too. In the case of the worst genocide in human history, such crocodile tears are supremely offensive. And finally, where a plaque is multilingual, and not just for local people, it should include Yiddish, the language of 100% of the victims. The victims were neither Israelis nor American

Jews. These simple tests of sincerity cost vastly less than some of the extravagant monuments at mass grave sites to be found in the forests of Eastern Europe.



Academic antisemitism studies in the region continue to be hampered by powerful politics. First comes the politics of the New Cold War, whereby there is reluctance to criticize anything about our NATO (or pro-NATO) allies, least of all on points of history on which these allies delude themselves into thinking they have a potent weapon against today's (very real) Putinist threat in the form of "fixing the history" (note the rather curious records of the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office in recent years). In the hands of the neocons and their followers, this tendency reaches its apex. Then there is the painful issue of Israeli policy on which there have been numerous public debates.

Holocaust manipulation is a major issue in East European antisemitism. That has been demonstrated in numerous scholarly works by, among others, Randolph L. Braham, Leonidas Donskis, Jan Gross, Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, Per Anders Rudling, Michael Shafir, and Efraim Zuroff. The late Robert Wistrich's 2010 opus, *A Lethal Obsession: Antisemitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* includes the important chapter 9, "Lying About the Holocaust." But the boldest academic analysis of the current European nexus of antisemitism and Holocaust revisionism is to be found in Clemens Heni's remarkable 2013 work, *Antisemitism: A Specific Phenomenon*, which exposes a number of German academic hands in the evolution of the current revisionism.

At the same time, East European governments, determined to pursue ultranationalist inspired Holocaust revisionism in the spirit of the 2008 Prague Declaration, need to demonstrate to the West that they are "fighting antisemitism," hence an expensive effort to produce conferences and convocations that have come to be known to local Jews as "fake antisemitism conferences." After one such conference in Vilnius in 2015, the good-willed sponsors, a grant program from the EEA (comprising Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) acted with admirable courage and dignity. Norway's universally admired ambassador to Lithuania took

the time and trouble to convene meetings with various genuinely non-governmental groups to ensure that such a fiasco is not repeated.

Needless to say, the international August 2016 event at Malát (Molėtai) will be — and should be — the subject of research by academics. It was, in fact, immediately grabbed upon by a paper with an impressive sounding name, “Two-Speed Memory and Ownership of the Past,” published in *Transitions on Line*, a notable “eurospeak-east” online journal. The paper heralds the “wide public attention, with representatives of virtually all political parties in attendance” but omits mentioning the plan before the town council to name a street for one of the collaborators in that very town, or indeed, the problem of street names and university lecture halls honoring Holocaust perpetrators across the land. Nor is there any mention of the annual marches on independence day that glorify Holocaust collaborators. Not a word about police and prosecutors’ efforts against citizens who stand up. One of the engines of European Holocaust revisionism, the deeply discredited “International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania” (popularly the “red-brown commission”) is lovingly called “the truth commission.” The history of the (now ten year old) state campaign against Holocaust survivors (including permanent defamation in the history record and on the web) is grossly misrepresented as a case of some have being asked to simply serve as “witnesses,” the far right’s excuse-making canard from the outset. In point of fact, the Genocide Center operative who first demanded in 2006, in an antisemitic daily, that the commission’s own member, Holocaust survivor (and former Yad Vashem director) Dr. Yitzhak Arad, be “tried for crimes against Lithuania” (not that he be called as a “witness”) has now been rewarded with full membership of said “truth commission.” Needless to say, this “academic paper” does not bother to mention the paper that Dr. Arad himself published about the commission and the entire topic. When East European nationalist propaganda is disguised as academic research, the scholarly imperative of citing published works that express a contrary opinion falls right off the table.

The paper’s final sentence reads: “In the end, a heightened public interest in the nature and history of collaboration, stimulated by the current Russian threat, may well promote a more complete coming to terms with the role of Lithuanians in the

atrocities of both the Soviet and Nazi regimes.” Indeed, conformity with the Baltic straightjacket dictates inclusion of both these “required endings”: First, that today’s (very real) Russian threat must be mixed up with discussions of the history of the Holocaust (and the very need to discuss the Holocaust here on its ground zero). Second, that any studies of collaboration in the murder of around 96% of Lithuania’s Jewish population must come together with studies of collaboration with the Soviet Union, because, so it is implied, all is after all equal and the same, and we are back to the tenets of what is also unmentioned in the article but hovers over it all: the Prague Declaration and its five uses of the word “same” to cover Nazi and Soviet crimes.

As an old Yiddish saying puts it, the whole world is just one big shtetl. Current political wind-drifts and some states’ substantial investments in coopting pliant Western and Israeli scholars have made it harder, temporarily, to study East European Holocaust obfuscation, Double Genocide revisionism, and the unique strains of antisemitism observed in the region. All the more reason for seasoned scholars in these fields to rise to the task of the hour.

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