# My Yiddish Month

## Why are we learning Yiddish in Vilnius?

To touch the lives of our ancestors. To honor the lives of the ordinary people who spoke it. To learn the language of passionate debates and fiery speeches in the struggle for a better world.

by ELLEN CASSEDY

Photos courtesy of Ellen Cassedy

**Author Ellen Cassedy (center) and Fania Brantsovsky (wearing hat) visit the Rudninku forest where Fania fought with the partisans.**
**On page 2: Vilna's statue of Tsemah Szabad (1864-1935), a physician and prominent public figure in Vilna.**

**Lauren, a graduate student from Los Angeles, was drawn to the connection between left-wing politics and the "language of the people."**

**Sunday, July 17**

Our month of Yiddish study has begun! My friend Jessica and I have arrived in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and settled into our apartment. Our front windows face a busy street full of rattling trolleys. In back, our courtyard lies within the former Vilna ghetto, where Jews were confined during the Nazi era.

It's my fourth summer at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, Jessica's first. On our way to the opening reception, we took our time, savoring the light of the Baltic sky, the elegant pastel facades, the walls rich with history. Once, on these cobblestoned streets, Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, and Russians rubbed elbows. Today, the city once known as "the Jerusalem of the North" is home to only 2,000 Jews. The place where the Great Synagogue stood is an empty lot.

Down University Street we went, then through the iron gates of Vilnius University, one of the oldest in Europe. The 50 summer students come from the United States, Lithuania, Russia, Germany, Austria, England, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Israel. The youngest, from Warsaw, studies Yiddish at her public high school. There's a healthy contingent of senior citizens. The institute director, Sarunas Liekis, a Lithuanian historian, welcomed us, as did our teachers, who hail from Argentina, Estonia, Israel and the United States.

**Monday, July 18**

We've been sorted out into four levels. All classes, from beginning to advanced, will take place almost entirely in Yiddish. In my class, we received a thick volume, a sampling from the past 150 years of modern Yiddish literature.

Jessica loved her first day. "Maybe the most fun I've had *ever,*" she said. Her class began with the basics: *Sholem Aleichem!* (Hello!) *A gut morgn!* (Good morning!) *Mayn nomen iz...* (My name is...) *Ikh bin fun...* (I'm from...)

Yiddish is a Germanic tongue written in Hebrew characters. The next step for her class is mastering the alphabet.

In the old days, Jewish boys would begin their studies at the age of three. On the first day, their primers were sprinkled with sugar to show that learning is sweet.

**Tuesday, July 19**

We walked across town for our weekly music workshop in the Jewish community building. The grand edifice is the site of a wide variety of activities for all ages. Under the direction of the chairwoman, Fania Kukliansky, the community strives to attract Jews and non-Jews alike to learn about Jewish culture.

Our workshop leader strapped on his accordion and guided us through a poignant song from the ghetto: "Vilna, our home! Vilna streets, Vilna rivers, Vilna forests, mountains and valleys." Then we belted out a rousing song of protest: "Why must we pay rent when the stove is broken?"

**Wednesday, July 20**

Why are we here? Each of us has an answer.

Over the centuries, Yiddish served as a portable homeland that Jews carried with them. Now it's become my home within Jewish culture.

I study Yiddish as a memorial to my mother and to honor the lives of ordinary people who spoke the language, including my own Lithuanian Jewish forebears on my mother's side (my father isn't Jewish). Over the centuries, Yiddish served as a portable homeland that Jews carried with them. Now it's become my home within Jewish culture. And, after repeated visits to Vilnius, I've come to care deeply about this place — its past, present and future.

Jessica, a composer, is writing a piece about how young Lithuanians are encountering the history of the Holocaust. She wants to immerse herself in the sights and sounds of the city, to touch the lives of her ancestors, to taste the language spoken by her grandfather and those who came before.

Avigayl, a senior at a university in Connecticut, grew up hearing about Vilnius from her mother, who was born here. "My mom remembered her address and what her stoop looked like," she said. "I found the stoop, sat down and called her in Chicago. We both cried."

For Avigayl, walking through the former ghetto is a powerful experience. "This is a very heavy city," she observed. "All these people who were my blood walked on these streets, fell in love here, died here, were murdered here." In this place of origins, she can feel herself changing. "Remembering is deeply tied into the way you live your life," she said. "As you learn about the history of oppression, how can you not do everything you can to make things better?"

Lauren, a graduate student from Los Angeles, also traces her roots to this city. What drew her here, she said, is "the connection between left-wing politics and the language of the people." Yiddish was the language of the lanes and kitchens of the Old World and the immigrant neighborhoods of the New, the language of passionate debates and fiery speeches in the struggle for a better world on both sides of the Atlantic.

**Friday, July 22**

After this first week, Jessica tells me she's starting to be able to read. As for me, my brain is filling up with Yiddish words and phrases, and already the lines of text look less forbidding than they did a few days ago.

In the evening, under the white sky, we walked to the Jewish community building for the *shabes tish*, the Friday night Sabbath gathering. We took our seats beside members of the local community at a long table laden with challah, candles, tasty traditional dishes and plenty of vodka.

The official rabbi of Vilnius lives in our building. When the sun went down at the end of the Sabbath — not till 11 p.m. — we crossed the hall to ask if he'd let us use his WiFi password. Cheerful

**The class made recipes using the *Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook* and described in Yiddish what they had prepared.**

**Strolling though the former Vilna ghetto is a powerful experience for Avigayl, whose ancestors walked these streets.**

**Marija, a Berlin graduate student in Jewish history, is a non-Jewish Lithuanian studying Yiddish.**

and friendly, he invited us in to see his collection of rabbinical seals engraved with signs of the zodiac, some of them hundreds of years old.

**Sunday, July 24**

Today was an all-day excursion with Fania Brantsovsky, 93, a former resident of the Vilna ghetto who works as the librarian at the Yiddish Institute. She took us first to the Jewish cemetery, where she showed us a memorial to teachers — *her* teachers — who perished during the ghetto years.

Outside of town, we paid our respects to the site in the forest of Ponar where thousands of Jews were shot and buried in giant pits.

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**Jessica is studying at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute for the first time.**

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Then we traveled through the lush Lithuanian countryside — down a straight road lined with pines, spruces, poplars and birches — to a bunker deep in the Rudninku forest, where Fania fought with the partisan forces against the Nazis. We drew near, then nearer, clustering around Fania as she told of the privations and exploits of that time.

On the bus, we sang "*Zog nit keynmol*," the Partisan Hymn. "Never say that you are walking your last road. Our steps sound out a drumbeat: We are here!"

**Monday, July 25**

We're reading stories by Sholem Aleichem, the towering Yiddish writer whose work inspired "Fiddler on the Roof." Our assignment was to write an essay (in Yiddish, of course) about why reading Sholem Aleichem is worthwhile. I wrote: "We come to know a vanished Jewish world — its customs and beliefs, rural and urban, rich and poor. We see how Jews and non-Jews interacted. As with all great writers, we learn about life in general. The sheer pleasure! We laugh, we cry. We learn idioms, improve our vocabulary. In joining with others to read this work, we continue the golden chain that is Yiddish literature."

In addition to being a student, I'm also a lecturer in the program. My talk today — in English — was called "Contested Memories: Lithuania Looks at the Holocaust."

I told about how I came here in search of my own Jewish family roots, then began to explore how Lithuania as a country is grappling with its Jewish heritage — *its* Jewish family roots, if you will. How does a country deal with a history of genocide? How does a land divided by competing narratives about the past begin to move toward a more tolerant future? Can we honor our diverse heritages without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past?

For centuries in Lithuania, Jews and non-Jews lived side by side mostly in peace. Yet beginning in 1941, the Holocaust in Lithuania was among the swiftest and most thorough anywhere in Europe. During the nearly 50 years of postwar Soviet rule that followed, Lithuania's Jewish heritage was further erased. Since independence in 1991, that heritage is coming out of the shadows.

Plaques and other markers of Jewish history are plentiful in Vilnius's Old Town. On the street where Jessica and I live, the walls of the old ghetto library are covered with heartbreaking family photos recovered from the ruins. The Vilna Gaon museum tells of centuries of Jewish history in Lithuania, along with the story of the destruction. Educational curricula and rituals of remembrance are proliferating, giving Lithuanians throughout the country an opportunity to face their history.

This evening, Jessica and I had dinner with Lara Lempert, leader of an effort to conserve and digitize Yiddish and Hebrew documents housed at Lithuania's national library. In a joint effort, archivists in New York are digitizing holdings that were rescued and moved to New York under the auspices of YIVO, the Jewish cultural research institute. In all, a million pages will be made available to scholars and members of the public.

**Tuesday, July 26**

In class each day, one of us gives a five-minute talk in Yiddish, without notes. Mine today was on a Yiddish children's poem about a *sove*. What is a *sove*? A bird with big, round eyes that flies at night and hunts for mice. "The less she spoke, the more she heard. What can we learn from that wise bird?"

Our teacher played recordings of great Yiddish poets reading their works. The juicy vowels and musical inflection of Rokhl Korn and Kadya Molodowsky rolled out into the classroom. Bliss!

I got together with a young man I met here two years ago. Lauras's family rescued Jews during the war. He undertook to get in touch with those Jews and their descendants all over world. The research changed his life. He now works as a project manager for the Jewish community.

"Jews are my fellow countrymen," he said. "I need to do all I can for the Jewish community."

**Wednesday, July 27**

"Ten years ago," recalled Marty, a student in my class, "I was diagnosed with throat cancer. I've never been so scared in my life. One night, my grandfather came to me in a dream, reached down into my throat and grabbed. I vowed that if I survived, I'd study Yiddish."

Marty was true to his word. A computer expert, he engineered an array of online Yiddish classes for the Workmen's Circle, a long-established Jewish cultural organization based in New York. Students and teachers alike log on from all over the world. "It doesn't matter where you are," Marty said. "*Mit yidish iz faran nit keyn 'dort'* " (with Yiddish, there is no 'there').

This is the future, Marty tells us. Yet here we are, on site in the former Jerusalem of the North. I wouldn't want it otherwise. Being here, walking these streets, looking up into this sky feels vitally important.

It was a gorgeous day, with a gentle breeze. Under an awning in St. John Square, I listened to a guitarist singing Bob Dylan as I read my homework assignment, a story about a hungry, homeless soldier in 1920's Poland.

The afternoon lecture compared Sholem Aleichem with another famed Yiddish writer, I.L. Peretz. The two didn't get along. Peretz hated humor, and Sholem Aleichem couldn't understand why.

"If you can't understand what I'm saying," the instructor said, "don't worry. Just sit back and enjoy the sound of the words."

Should I follow his advice, let go and allow the language to wash over me? Or should I behave as usual, leaning forward on the edge of my seat and struggling desperately to catch every word?

**Friday, July 29**

"We learned about past tense," Jessica told me excitedly. "I got it!" *Er falt.* He falls. *Er iz gefaln.* He fell. *Er falt arop.* He falls down. *Er iz aropgefaln*. He fell down.

The energetic Fania Brantsovsky led a walk through the streets of the former Jewish quarter, beginning with the street still called Jewish Street — *Zydu gatve* in Lithuanian, *Yidishe gas* in

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## Yiddish

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Yiddish. She pointed out the sites of the former Yiddish theater, the Yiddish newspaper office, schools, libraries and publishing houses. Here was the butchers' street, there the beggars' street, here the street where the tough guys of the Jewish underworld plied their trade.

At lunch with a Lithuanian psychologist I know and her friend, a Russian psychologist, we talked about what people gain from researching their family roots.

"You become rich with these people," I said. "They become yours."

"Exploring your ancestry makes you immortal," they said. "You have your place. You become a link in a chain."

That's how studying Yiddish makes me feel.

**Saturday, July 30**

Jessica went to services at the Chor Shul, the only synagogue now functioning in Vilnius out of a hundred before the war. Up in the balcony in the women's section, she discovered a display of photos of empty wooden synagogues from towns across Lithuania. She burst into tears. Images of the abandoned houses of worship kept returning to her mind during the lively lunch that followed — a meal with cholent (the traditional Sabbath stew), vodka and loud Yiddish singing.

**Monday, August 1**

Marija is one of several non-Jewish Lithuanians taking the course. Growing up in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas (Kovno in Yiddish), she said, "I noticed we learned very little Jewish history. I went looking for books in the library." Bit by bit, her interest grew. Now she's a graduate student in Jewish history in Berlin. "I see myself as a mediator between cultures," she said.

Jessica came home from a day trip to Butrimonys, her ancestral town. With the help of a guide, she was able to speak with townspeople. "Our grandparents probably knew each other," one woman said as she welcomed her across the threshold into her home. During the war, she said, her family had hidden three Jewish boys.

Jessica and her guide gathered apples by the side of the road — a much-loved kind that fall from the trees when they ripen in late summer.

The fruit was sweet. "It's amazing to be sitting here eating apples from Butrimonys," Jessica said. "It's a mythical place — and then it's real."

**Wednesday, August 3**

Jessica has reached a peak of frustration. "I *hate* language immersion," she fumed.

I sympathize! Class was hard for me, too, today. Despite everything I've learned over the years, it's clear I've only scratched the surface — which makes me feel I need to come back next year.

"I'm glad to be here," one of my fellow students said after struggling through a difficult passage. "I'm *glad* to be in over my head."

Me, too. Today I couldn't stop reading the Soviet-era story we'd been assigned. Dense as it was, I couldn't wait to find out what happened. Would the doctor cure the blind man or wouldn't he?

**Monday, August 8**

One of our teachers can speak Yiddish in rhymes, effortlessly, like a rap artist. He assigned us to turn in our own verses, then delighted us by expertly rewriting our clumsy efforts. He shared some recordings from AHEYM, Indiana University's Archives of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories. The interviews with people who grew up speaking Yiddish in Eastern Europe capture their vocabulary, pronunciation, memories, songs.

**Wednesday, August 10**

Jessica's class often begins with singing. Students join in as they enter. The sweet sounds waft through the classroom. *"Tum bala, tum bala, tum balalaika..."*

Her teacher speaks fast, but he repeats a lot. This week's story was called "Seven + Seven = Eleven." A woman from Chelm — Yiddish literature's town of fools — goes to the store for herring and a loaf of bread and gives the proprietor a hard time when he asks her to pay.

Students read the sentences aloud and the teacher peppered them with questions: What did she buy? Do you like herring? Where does she live? *"Gut! Vayter!* (Good! Go on!)

My final lecture — this time in Yiddish — was about the *Vilna Vegetarian Cookbook,* published in 1938 and recently translated into English. I asked 10 students to choose recipes from the book, bring the food to share and describe in Yiddish what they'd prepared. Charles brought sliced cucumbers; Sofija, spinach dumplings; Jack, a tomato frittata; Barbara, stuffed eggs; Jill, a beet salad.

Fania laughed as she pulled out of her memory the Yiddish words for cauliflower, cranberry and coriander. And Jessica proudly got up to tell about her fruit salad: "I went to the market. I washed the grapes. I cut up the pears and plums."

The food was *geshmak* (delicious).

**Thursday, Aug 11**

Our Yiddish month is coming to an end. Tonight we'll sing the songs we learned in our music workshop at a concert at the Jewish community building. Tomorrow we'll receive our certificates and say *zayt gezunt* (goodbye) at the closing ceremony.

This morning a folksinger from Israel came to class bearing a poem she'd put to music. Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010) survived the Vilna ghetto and became the greatest postwar Yiddish poet. His poem "*Yidishe gas*" (Jewish Street) refers not only to the actual street here in Vilnius but to the Jewish community as a whole.

As she sang the haunting tune, Polina's eyes filled with tears.

"*Yidishe gas, yidishe gas*" — "Jewish Street, you have not vanished. Jewish Street, let us bind ourselves to you. Let me hear your sounds forever."

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*NOTE: The summer program of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute is accepting applications at http://judaicvilnius.com.*

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*Ellen Cassedy is the author of* We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust *and co-translator, with Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, of* Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories *by Blume Lempel (Mandel Vilar Press/Dryad Press). She lives in Washington, DC. Visit her website: www.ellencassedy.com.*