

Perpetuating the Living Legacy of Vilna's Jewish Culture and Tradition

by Rivka Schiller

Marking the 65th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto and the 55th anniversary since the formation of the Nusakh Vilne *landsmanshaft*, YIVO, in conjunction with Nusakh Vilne, hosted its fourth annual commemorative ceremony. In accordance with the organization's stipulations, the ceremony was held at YIVO on September 21, the Sunday closest to the date when the ghetto's final liquidation began—September 23, 1943.

The event attracted some 200 attendees of varying ages, composed mostly of individuals bearing some direct or indirect familial connection to Vilna or Lithuanian Jewry. Among those present were Ruth Walt Katz, a long-time supporter of YIVO and the niece of Abraham Walt Liessin, the well-known Yiddish poet and editor of the New York-based Yiddish literary journal *Di tsukunft*. Katz, of Belarusian-Jewish heritage, grew up hearing about YIVO and is familiar with pre-World War II Vilna's Jewish culture.

YIVO Executive Director Carl Rheins ushered in the program with a speech about growing tensions in Lithuanian-Jewish relations. Of particular concern, according to Rheins, is the refusal of the Lithuanian government to take an active stand on the restitution of looted



A group of Jewish partisans shortly after the liberation of Vilna, July 1944

Jewish assets and stolen property. This includes a significant number of books from the Strashun Library at YIVO's original institute. (For more on this subject from Dr. Rheins, see pp. 2-3.)

Following Rheins' opening remarks, Rachel Gurdus and her daughter Lydia Baukh, both born in Vilna, lit candles in memory and honor of Vilna friends. Later in the program Ella Levine, director of Development and External Affairs at YIVO, recited the names of Nusakh Vilne members who had passed in the previous year: Tanya Corbin, a member of the Strashun family; Sara Klor, wife of partisan Boris Klor; and Leon Tzipelovitz.

The afternoon's keynote speaker was Michael Bart of San Diego. Bart is the son of Holocaust survivors Leizer and Zenia Bart (both now deceased), who were members of the Vilna ghetto underground and fought in the Jewish partisan fighting group Nekamah (Avengers), led by Abba Kovner. Bart's recent book about his parents' wartime experiences and those of the Jewish Resistance—the culmination of a ten-year research project to learn

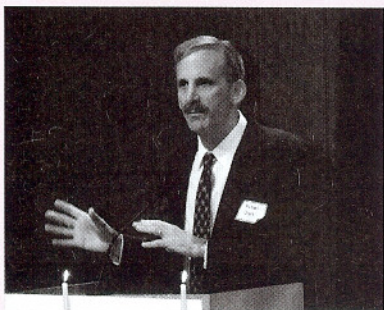
more about his parents' time in the Vilna ghetto—is titled *Until Our Last Breath*, a testament to the urgent call delivered by Abba Kovner in December 1941, in which he implored the Jewish youth not to go like sheep to the slaughter, but to revolt. His closing remarks were, "Arise! Arise with your last breath!"

Bart had known relatively little about his parents' activities during the war because they rarely spoke about those times. It was at his father's funeral that one of the mourners approached him to say that he should inscribe the word *nekamah* on his father's headstone to acknowledge his heroic contributions to the Jewish resistance movement in Vilna. Prior to that moment, Bart had no knowledge of *Nekamah* or of his parents' involvement in the group. This newfound awareness motivated Bart's research into Jewish Vilna and his Lithuanian Jewish heritage.

In his remarks, Bart conveyed how his parents and 120 other members of the Jewish underground escaped from the Vilna ghetto to the Rudnicki forest,

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Keynote speaker Michael Bart during YIVO's annual Nusakh Vilne Yizker and Memorial Lecture



25 miles away, where they survived the particularly bitter winter of 1943 in bunkers camouflaged by tree limbs, subsisting on a combination of swamp water and flour and food pilfered from nearby towns and villages. At the same time, they managed to cut telephone lines and derail and bomb German trains, many of which contained weapons and explosives.

Providing musical accompaniment and spiritual inspiration to the program was Cantor Victor Wortman, the son of Holocaust survivors, who serves the Bay Terrace Jewish Center of Bayside. Wortman's connection to the *khurbn* and familiarity with the legacy of Vilna Jewry were fully evident during his meaningful renditions of "Ani Ma'amin," "El Malei Rachomim," and, later in the program, the "Partisan Hymn." Among other Yiddish musical pieces Wortman performed was "Shtiler, Shtiler," composed in the Vilna ghetto

in 1943 by 11-year-old Alek Wolkowiski with lyrics by Shmerke Kaczerginski that describe Ponary, the killing ground outside of Vilna where most of the ghetto's Jews were murdered.

Rounding out the ceremony, Moish Palevsky, son of Nusakh Vilne members Khayele and the late Simon Palevsky, read "A Day in the Vilna Ghetto," an extract from the diaries of Herman Kruk, followed by brief addresses from Nusakh Vilne member Renee Abt, a child survivor of the Holocaust, and Elliott Palevsky, Moish Palevsky's brother, who spoke about his experience this summer teaching Yiddish in Vilnius. Palevsky concluded with a message of hope: "It is not sufficient merely to memorialize" the Jewish Vilna of yesterday, but it is also incumbent upon us to perpetuate the living legacy and spirit of "Yerushalayim de Lite" to our children, grandchildren, and all future generations.



[L-R] Ray (Khayele) Palevsky, Hinda Jacobs, Rachel Gurdus, and Lydia Baukh

In her closing remarks, Ella Levine expressed a desire, in keeping with Elliott Palevsky's message, to extend the golden chain of Lithuanian-Jewish heritage by creating a group for the children of natives of Jewish Lithuania, with the first meeting to take place in Jerusalem. ■

For remarks by Khayele Palevsky from the event, see Yiddish p. T.