

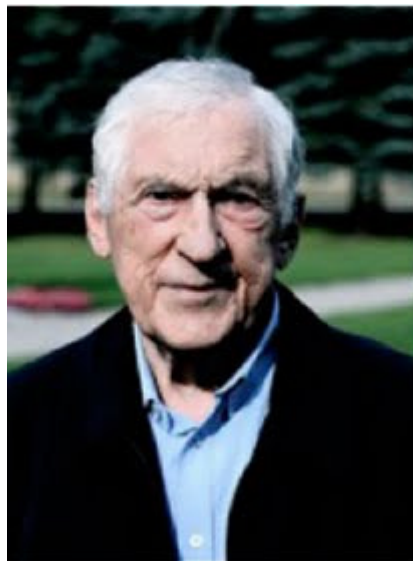


<http://jewishgen.blogspot.com/2010/05/lithuanian-jewish-spirit-lives-on.html>

**Tuesday, May 11**

## [The Lithuanian Jewish Spirit Lives On](#)

**By Claudia B. Braude**  
**Cape Town, South Africa**



Joseph Levinson

JOSEPH LEVINSON, 91, resident of Vilnius, Lithuania, was saved from his father's horrific fate and that of 95 per cent of Lithuania's Jewish residents by conscription into the Soviet Army.

Returning to his shtetl in 1945, Veisiejai, witnesses' accounts of how Jews were murdered made Levinson's hair "stand on end". "I listened to how it happened, and I froze... I silently vowed: '...these horrors cannot remain unknown. The knowledge should be spread, so that this will never happen again'."

Levinson spent years "in cellars, libraries and archives" investigating the massacres. When Lithuania gained independence in 1991, he erected memorials at more than 200 Lithuanian mass graves.

Levinson's testimony and experience are included in "[Surviving History: Portraits from Vilna](#)", a multimedia exhibition, launched in Vilnius in September, 2009, and shown the Cape Town Holocaust Centre till April 29, 2010. Representing the lives of 10 Lithuanian Holocaust survivors, the

exhibition includes photographs, video, an award-winning documentary, and archival documentation and biographical objects.

When curator Shivaun Woolfson asked Levinson for an object imbued with personal significance, he gave her his Book of Sorrows documenting his memorial sites. Lynsey Cleaver, one of the international artists who collaborated on the exhibition, wove it into an interpretive art box representing the survivor's internal world.

Describing her philosophy of history as explicitly Chassidic, Woolfson affirms the 'place for spirituality in academic research'. She is influenced by Reb Nachman of Bratslav's understanding of the transformative relationship between teller and listener: 'The word moves a bit of air, and this the next, and reaches the soul of the other, of the listener, and his soul therein is awakened. "Survivors speak to be heard. They wouldn't speak without someone listening on the other side. In Holocaust narrative, it's assumed the listener will retell the tale," she said.

Ensuring their oral testimonies are retold, Surviving History reverses what has become, since the demise of Communism and apartheid, a familiar journey back to Lithuania, ancestral home to many South African Jews. Flowing from the search for traces of immigrant parents and grandparents is a return of memory of the repressed traumatic history.

The exhibition was accompanied by movies and other events representing some of these journeys. The documentary "Kupishok: Unto Each Name a Person" records the 2004 consecration by South African and other survivors and their families of a memorial wall of names of murdered residents of Kupiskis in Lithuania.

In his presentation on Litvak history, including his own research in Lithuania, Ivan Kapelus (whose Kupiskis-born mother-in-law emigrated to Cape Town in 1929), reflected on the significance of this memory for his audience: "South African Jewry has been the heir to the Litvak heritage.

It was the Litvak tradition that gave South African Jewry its communal institutions, orphanages, old aged home and schools," he said. Aiming to uncover the living traces of Lithuania's Jewish heritage, Woolfson (whose grandmother came from Akmene in northern Lithuania) realized Dublin's tiny Jewish community of her 1960s childhood, was, like South Africa, "a very Litvak world". "Entering homes in Vilnius, I stepped back in time to my grandmother's kitchen. Without knowing Yiddish or Russian, this world felt known and familiar," she said.

Searching for fragments, Woolfson discovered more than overgrown cemeteries and mass murder sites. "The Lithuanian Jewish spirit lives on, in spite of the horrors. Jewish presence in Lithuania is nowhere, yet it is everywhere," she says. "The material isn't just about death and loss, but



about life and what these individuals held onto. Considering it their sacred duty to keep the past alive, they're so vibrant. They're phenomenal for their capacity to keep on choosing life. The harder they've struggled, the sturdier they are. "Their compassion, resilience and astonishing courage have touched me deeply. I ask what they want their legacy to be. They answer: 'kindness, goodness, love for others'.

"People say, 'you're not Jewish, why are you doing this work?'" said co-curator Francis Tay. "Holocaust education isn't just about stopping anti-Semitism and racism. It's about humanity. I've never heard anyone talk about love for humanity the way survivor Fanya Brantsovksy talks about love," she said. "Reaching into humanity, the material puts others in touch with their own humanity."

Woolfson and Tay were struck by reaction of participants in a teachers' seminar they conducted at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. "The response here was the most alive we've had. The teachers immediately drew parallels to South African history, referring to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One man was grief-stricken, having lost his daughter in a car crash. 'How do the bereaved continue?' he asked. "We haven't previously encountered such a reverential atmosphere when people told their stories, nor people digging so deep," said Tay. "Commemoration has a different resonance here."

The Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre hosts the exhibition at the Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre at the Great Park Synagogue until May 16 including an ancillary programme consisting of a screening of "The Kastner Trial" - a three-part television true-life drama, a lecture by Ronnie Mink and "[Where is Kovno?](#)" - a presentation by Yda Walt and Andy Spitz. The Durban Holocaust Centre will host it at the Durban Jewish Club from May 25 - June 7.

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