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# Stolpersteine (“Stumbling Stones”) Installation Dedicated in Vilnius

By Yossi Shem-Avi

I recently took part in the opening ceremonies for the first Stolpersteine installation in Vilnius, Lithuania ([www.stolpersteine.eu](http://www.stolpersteine.eu)). Here’s a portion of my speech: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Mayor, Israeli and Lithuanian Ambassadors, Mr. Gunter Demnig, relatives of the survivors, and guests.

My name is Yossi Shem-Avi and I’m here with my sister Chaya Maor, and our daughters Ella and Yael. Today we will memorialize my father’s parents Lejba and



The three brass plaques installed on Vasario 16 Street (Mr. Schemiavitz’s childhood home which still stands).

- Vilna was the foremost center of Rabbinical learning in Europe

- ✧ Six daily newspapers
  - ✧ Schools (including the famous Tarbut), theatres, a publishing house, and even Shakespeare was performed in Yiddish
  - ✧ A museum of Jewish history and ethnography
  - ✧ A Jewish Science institute
  - ✧ A robust network of Jewish social services
- The term “Vilner” became a pseudonym to an “educated man with knowledge” in Europe.

But everything changed of course starting in the summer of 1939.

While translating my father’s memoir “Behind The Gate” by Michael Schemiavitz to English, I learned many details about the war I didn’t know – this was typical of the survivors who wanted to protect their children from the horrors they experienced – but one fact kept haunting me - the story of his younger and only sister Leja who was burned in Bez-dani with about 200 others when she was 12 years old. What made it incomprehensible is the fact that there is no trace of her, no grave, no piece of garment, not one photograph.

The German sculpture Gunter Demnig credits a Talmudic quote as inspiration for the Stolpersteine memorial: “A person is only forgotten when his/her name is forgotten.” So with Gunter’s project

Chaya Schemiavitz and his sister Leja 73 years after they perished with no trace.

Jews lived mostly in peaceful coexistence in Lithuania (Lita) and particularly Vilnius (Vilna) for almost 700. Grand Duke Gediminas actually invited the Western European Jewry in the 16th century with tax incentives and promise of religious freedom. Our people survived the Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms, and laws designed to discourage Judaic life but found Lita hospitable for many years.

In 1812, Napoleon reaching Vilnius was so impressed with the cultural and academic achievement of the community that he coined the term “Jerusalem of the North.” Here’s a picture of the Vilna Jewish community on the eve of WWII in 1939:

✧ There were 100 synagogues and 10 Yeshiva rabbinical schools



Discussion at the Vilna Public Jewish Library.

– translated as “Stumbling Stones” - we can right that historical wrong and commemorate Leja and her parents at last in front of their house on Vasario 16 Street where they lived before being forced into the ghetto.

I feel that against our will, my sister and I, along with the first generation born in Israel Holocaust survivors, carry personal and historical burden to remember and make sense of it all. And I am torn:

- \* How to reconcile darkness with kindness, good with evil.
- \* How to connect 600 years of peaceful coexistence with 70,000 dead in Ponar mass grave.
- \* How to tell my friends in America that the Final Solution started in Lithuania where 90-95% of the Jews were killed or died, arguably the highest ratio in Europe.
- \* How to explain that Lithuania is just now beginning to process their role in the killings 72 years after the war ended and 26 years after independence.
- \* How to accept when folks here equate anti-Soviet activities under the guise of mass killings.
- \* How to accept the sentiment of victimization of Lita by the Nazis and Soviets as an explanation for the killings of Jews.
- \* How to understand how

(Continued on page 14)

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