

# Documenting the Vilna Ghetto Library

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Vilna – known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania – had a strong cultural tradition before the Shoah that endured and flourished after the Vilna Ghetto was established in 1941. Many historians believe the most important cultural institution in the Ghetto was the Vilna Ghetto Library, which became the center for Jewish secular cultural life in the ghetto.

In the two years in which the Vilna Ghetto Library functioned, it had 6,800 readers. Documentation from the Vilna Ghetto Library has survived and includes lists of readers in the Library, lists of workers in the Library and even a list of readers who did not return books to the Library.

Most of these lists are in the Lithuanian State Central Archive in Vilnius and are also available in the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem. and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, as part of RG-26.015M at <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn502384> which covers the Vilnius Ghetto.

Although none of the lists appear to include the names of the books that specific patrons took out of the Library, several documents from Vilna Ghetto librarians provide insight into the sorts of books that circulated – and in what languages. Particularly valuable in this respect are “The Library in the Vilna Ghetto” by Dina Abramowicz and “Library and Reading Room in the Vilna Ghetto” by Herman Kruk, both published in the volume “The Holocaust and the Book.” (see “Suggested Reading” in this handout.)

I have ordered numerous lists of books from the Vilna Ghetto Library from the USHMM Archive and am waiting to receive them.

The ghetto library was opened in September, 1941 at 6 Strashun Street on the site of the *Mefitzei Haskalah* (Disseminators of Enlightenment) library, with about 45,000 books. During the summer of 1942, about 5,000 people visited the reading room every month. The book collection was 70 percent fiction, 20 percent nonfiction; seven percent children’s literature; and three percent periodicals. As higher quality literature was requested by readers, the ghetto library was able to appropriate collections from other institutions, such as the Realgymnasium, the Ivriyah Gymnasium, and the YIVO Institute..

In addition to the main Library and Reading room, some educational institutions and youth clubs also held small libraries. These were located at the Ghetto prison (200 vols.); Kailis fur factory (150 vols); Yeladim transport office (28 vols); Children’s Home (53 vols), and Youth Club (150 vols).

On December 13, 1942, there was a major celebration marking the circulation of the 100,000<sup>th</sup> book by the Vilna Ghetto Library. One of the hundreds of attendees at the celebration was 15-year-old- Yitzhak Rudashevski, whose diary entry that day eloquently expressed the meaning of the Library, (see “Suggested Reading”) ”The reading of books in the ghetto is the greatest pleasure for me. The book unites us with the future, the book unites us with the world.”

## *Suggested Reading About*

### *the Vilna Ghetto and the Vilna Ghetto Library*

Abramowicz, Dina, *Guardians of a Tragic Heritage: Reminiscences and Observations of an Eyewitness*, a lecture delivered at the Assn. of Jewish Libraries, Philadelphia, PA June 23, 1998, reprinted by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture

Abramowicz, Dina, *The Library in the Vilna Ghetto*, pp 165-170, *The Holocaust and the Book*, ed. Jonathan Rose. Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

Arad, Yitzhak, *Ghetto in Flames*: Jerusalem, Yad Vashem , 1981

Balberyszski, Mendel, *Stronger than Iron: The Destruction of Vilna Jewry 1941-1945: an Eyewitness Account*, Jerusalem, New York, Gefen Publishing House, 2010.

Kruk, Herman, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-44*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2002. Material on the Vilna Ghetto Library may be found on pp

Kruk, Herman, *Library and Reading Room in the Vilna Ghetto, Strashun Street 6*, pp 171-200, *The Holocaust and the Book*, ed. Jonathan Rose, Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. (Contains translation of report on the Vilna Ghetto Library presented at the celebration of the circulation of the 100,000<sup>th</sup> book.)

Ran, Leyzor, *Yerusholayim de-Lite, Vol. 2*, New York, Vilner Album Komitet, 1974. p. 453.

Rudashevski, Yitzhak, *The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*, Israel, Beit Lohamei Haghetaot/Ghetto Fighters House, 1979

Rudavsky, Joseph, *To Live with Hope, To Die with Dignity: Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos and Camps*, Northvale, N.J., Jerusalem, Jason Aaronson Inc., 1997

Shavit, David, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe*, Jefferson, N.C. and London, McFarland & Co., 1997. Chapter 1, Jewish Libraries on the Eve of Destruction, pp. 25-28, 37-39; Chapter 6, Vilna Ghetto, pp. 93-112; Chapter 8, Books and Readers, pp. 135-137, 142-143,146.

Shavit, David, *Jewish Libraries in the Polish Ghettos During the Nazi Era*, Library Quarterly, Vol. 52, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago, Press, April 1982. pp. 112-118.

Sukys, Julia, "And I Burned with Shame," *the testimony of Ona Simaite, Righteous Among the Nations*," Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2007.

Sukys, Julia, *Epistophilia: writing the life of Ona Simaite*, Lincoln, NE and London, University of Nebraska Press.

*Vilnius Ghetto: List of Prisoners 1942*, 2 vols. Vilnius, Lietuvos Valstybinis Zydu muzejus, 1996-98