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Do you believe the world is round? Think again. On November 8th, the day before the 72nd anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, members of the German army placed wreaths at a memorial for Jewish soldiers who fought and died for Germany in WW I.

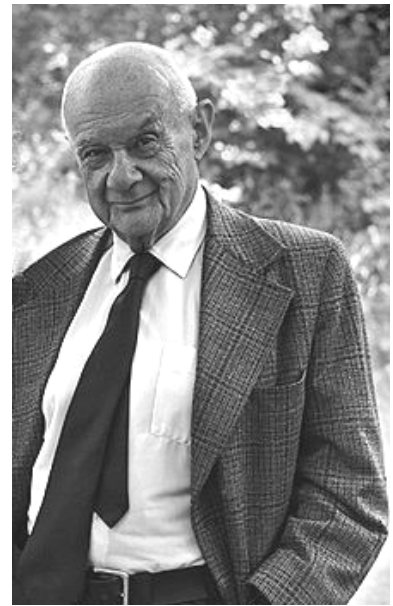
A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac

by **Alana Newhouse** (*Editor in chief of Tablet Magazine, an online publication devoted to Jewish life and culture*)

New York Times Magazine, March 29, 2010

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/magazine/04shtetl-t.html>

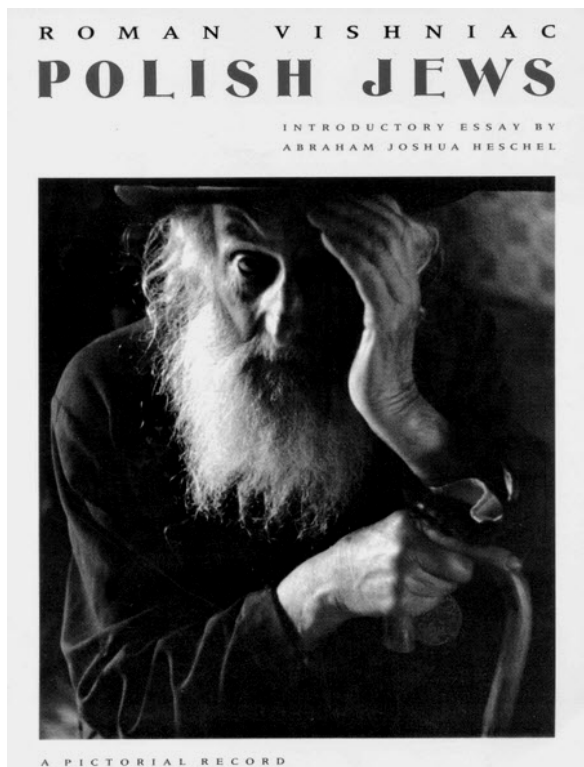
In 1983, Farrar, Straus & Giroux published a book of pictures of prewar Eastern European Jewish life by the photographer Roman Vishniac. Titled “A Vanished World,” the book evoked what many have come to imagine as life in the shtetl: elegiac images of small cities and provincial villages, their hunchback rabbis walking cobblestone streets, Talmud prodigies studying by candlelight, men whispering in courtyards — a vision lighted with authenticity and charged with nostalgia. Through this and other books, Vishniac’s body of work has come to be thought of as the last photographic record of a universe on the cusp of being comprehensively and cataclysmically destroyed. His pictures were used in so many influential books about Jewish life before the Holocaust — as illustrations for books by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Irving Howe and later serving as what Janusz Kaminski called the “guiding force” for his Oscar-winning cinematography of “Schindler’s List” — that Vishniac, who died in 1990, has virtually become, in the words of Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, “the official mortuary photographer of Eastern European Jewry.”



Roman Vishniac, 1977

If you were to pick up a copy of “A Vanished World” in a contemporary American Jewish home and turn to the final spread, you would see two photographs. On the left, a man peers anxiously from a window in a metal door; on the right, a boy of no more than 3 or 4 points a small finger across his eye line. The caption reads: “The father is hiding from the Endecy (members of the National Democratic Party). His son signals him that they are approaching. Warsaw, 1938.” An index at the front of the book, which features additional commentary on the photographs, fills out the frightening tale: “The *pogromshchiki*” — a lynch mob — “are coming. But the iron door was no protection.”

It is a poignant scene — haunting and full of narrative pathos. But it almost certainly did not happen. The pictures in that spread, it turns out, came from different rolls of film, probably shot in different towns — which means, of course, that its characters were presumably not only unrelated but also most likely did not even know each other.



“Polish Jews” by Roman Vishniac first appeared in 1947. The cover photo is from the 1975 edition.

Vishniac’s archive is being acquired by the International Center of Photography. The collection — which includes thousands of negatives taken during forays into Jewish communities in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia, along with reams of correspondence and personal documents — will become part of an elite canon, one of only a handful of archives housed at the museum and research center in Midtown Manhattan. Others belong to Cornell Capa, the institution’s founder; his brother, Robert Capa; and Arthur Fellig, a.k.a. Weegee, the 20th-century street photographer. The center will be sharing the Vishniac archive with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

But the center will not only be acquiring Vishniac’s entire life’s work; as the father-son spread suggests, it is also inheriting a fascinating set of ambiguities and unanswered questions — all unexpectedly uncovered by a 34-year-old curator named Maya Benton. As Benton has discovered, Vishniac released, over the course of a five-decade career, an uncommonly small selection of his work for public consumption — so small, in fact, that it did not include many of his finest images, artistically speaking. Instead the chosen images were, in the main, those that advanced an impression of the

shtetl as populated largely by poor, pious, embattled Jews — an impression aided by cropping and fabulist captioning done by his own hand. Vishniac’s curating job was so comprehensive that it would not only limit the appreciation of his talents but also skew the popular conception of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Europe.

Sometime in 1989, Maya Benton, then a 14-year-old living in Los Angeles, had an epiphany. The daughter of a single mother, a psychoanalyst who as a child lived for years in a displaced-persons camp in Germany, Benton grew up in a household that was a relative rarity in American Jewish life: Yiddish speaking but cosmopolitan, well off and not Orthodox. As she lolled on the couch of her grandparents’ home, Benton started sneaking chocolate rum balls from a sterling silver box — one of two family heirlooms from, she had assumed, Novogrudek, the historic Jewish town in what is now Belarus from which her grandparents hailed before the Holocaust. As Benton stared at the weighty birthright from the *alte heym*, or Old World, bafflement struck: she knew, from an interview she conducted with her family members for a history class, that they fled the German invasion, hid in nearby forests, were interned at multiple labor camps and trekked through miles of often snow-covered forest in the east. How on earth, Benton thought as she considered the ornate container, did they manage to schlep this through Siberia? The confusion grew when she considered the second heirloom: a full set of Rosenthal china.

As it turned out, the box and the china had not been in the family for generations, nor were they from Novogrudek. As Maya’s grandmother, Tonia Benton, explained that afternoon, they were among the things that she and her husband bought from impoverished Germans after the war;

bartering the chocolate and cigarettes they received in the displaced-persons camp, they were able to buy valuable items that could be used as currency to get the family to America. That day, Maya Benton says, she learned a lesson about people's need for, and uses of, mythical narratives.

It was a lesson she would be reminded of 11 years later as a graduate student in art history and museum education at Harvard, when she was assigned to research a book of photography. Her mind alighted on Roman Vishniac, whose books had been familiar — almost familial — objects of her childhood, filled as they were with the masterful, plaintive portraits for which he was known in Holocaust-survivor circles and beyond. Plus, she said, she thought she was already pretty conversant in his life story.

Roman Vishniac was born in Russia in 1897 to wealthy, secular Jewish parents. His father, one of Russia's leading manufacturers of umbrellas and parasols, and his mother, the daughter of a diamond dealer, raised him in Moscow. The family lived comfortably, especially in contrast to other Jews, many of whom roamed the city looking for work. "They had a special kind of face, those people, a special kind of whisper and a special kind of footstep," Vishniac told a writer for *The New Yorker* in 1955. "They were like hunted animals."

In 1918, prompted by post-revolution turmoil, Vishniac's family decided to make their way west. Vishniac at first stayed behind to continue his university studies in biology. But he eventually joined his family in Berlin. In the 1930s, as Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign began in earnest, Vishniac, armed with both a Leica and a Rolleiflex, set out east to document the world from which his people had fled. It is unknown when exactly Vishniac traveled to the Pale of Settlement, but his trips most likely began around 1935 and ended in 1938, a period marked by the increasing poverty of Jewish communities and culminating in the German takeover of Poland and its three million Jews. Vishniac later claimed that he took 16,000 photographs — many of them, he added, with a hidden camera used to elude the local police and Orthodox authorities who forbade photography as the creation of "graven images." He said he was arrested multiple times.

"My friends assured me that Hitler's talk was sheer bombast," Vishniac said in 1955. "But I replied that he would not hesitate to exterminate those people when he got around to it. And who was there to defend them? I knew I could be of little help, but I decided that, as a Jew, it was my duty to my ancestors, who grew up among the very people who were being threatened, to preserve — in pictures, at least — a world that might soon cease to exist."

This was the accepted biography of Vishniac, told and retold in his own books and others, as well as in numerous newspaper, magazine and radio interviews. But in casting around for academic research, Benton came up short. "In my Yiddish-speaking, secular environment, Vishniac was essential," she says. "And yet I could find no scholarship." Benton decided to begin researching Vishniac's story herself, from the beginning — starting with a book she had never seen before: his 1947 collection, "Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record," the first published book of Vishniac's Eastern European photography.

Considering it for the first time, Benton immediately noticed a tottering imbalance: an overabundance of pictures conveying piety and poverty, especially shots of boys in *cheder*, or religious school. "Rabbi, rabbi, rabbi, followed by — my favorite — the sad shopkeepers with nothing to sell, then *cheder*, *cheder*, *cheder*, followed by one *alte frau* in a babushka," Benton trilled, prattling off an inventory of the book's images in a recent conversation in the Upper West Side apartment she shares with her husband, Daniel Reich, a lawyer. "I thought to myself, this is a very odd publication. You would think that right after the Holocaust they would choose the images that readers could identify with. But these images are most *other*."

They were also, when taken as a whole, misleading. Jewish life in Eastern Europe, especially in the interwar years, was roiling and diverse. All kinds of people — secular and religious, urban and rural, wealthy and poor — consorted freely with one another in all aspects of what many of us would consider the pillars of a modern society: a lively and contentious political culture, a theater scene that rivaled those of most major European cities, a literary tradition comprising not only Yiddish and Hebrew work but also European fiction and a thriving economic trade that successfully linked cities and countrysides (one of Vishniac's unpublished pictures shows a store in a tiny Eastern European town selling oranges imported from Palestine). Even Hasidic life, so easily caricatured as provincial and isolated, was nothing of the sort: yeshivas, like today's universities, often attracted students from all over Eastern and Central Europe. The concentration of poverty and piety in Vishniac's pictures in "Polish Jews" created a distinct impression of timelessness, an unchanging, "authentic society" captured in amber.

Benton soon encountered something else that was peculiar. Vishniac claimed that he had gone east on an "assignment from God," as he put it in one interview, implying that his work was undertaken without financial support or an institutional mandate. But in a biographical note in a book published after Vishniac's death, Benton came upon a sentence that suggested otherwise: "The Joint Distribution Committee representatives in Berlin asked Roman, who was known for his photographic work, to travel to Eastern Europe, in order to document daily life in the shtetls." The Joint Distribution Committee was founded in 1914 as a relief organization primarily committed to helping Jews around the world who were threatened by poverty, natural disaster or persecution. It was also, not incidentally, the same organization that fed Benton's grandmother and mother in the displaced-persons camp after the war.

Within weeks of this discovery, Benton was on a train to the committee's headquarters in New York to investigate Vishniac's relationship with the organization. What she found in its files shocked her. Vishniac had indeed been sent on a very specific assignment: to document not the fullness of Eastern European Jewish life but its most needy, vulnerable corners for a fund-raising project. It was a noble cause, to be sure, but very different from how he later represented his work. The committee had contracts, receipts and telegrams. Benton later heard that the organization may even have produced a donation tin decorated with one of Vishniac's most famous shots, "Sara, the Only Flowers of Her Youth." Recognized for excellence at an international photographic exhibition in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1952, the picture showed a heart-rending image of an unhappy-looking young girl in bed, with a smattering of flowers painted on the dingy wall behind her. Vishniac explained that its subject, Sara, had to spend the winter in bed because her parents did not have money to buy her shoes. "The picture of the world I had recreated in my mind — the world my whole family came from — was actually from a commission to document only the poor and the Orthodox," Benton said.

In California for winter break not long after making these discoveries, Benton phoned Vishniac's daughter and the executor of his estate, Mara Vishniac Kohn, who was 74 and living in Santa Barbara. Though skeptical of scholars who she feared would pigeonhole her father's work as kitsch, Vishniac Kohn, whom I met not long ago, was moved by the combination of Benton's youthful energy, scholarly ambition and Yiddish kindredness. The day they met, Vishniac Kohn offered to drive with Benton to the mini-storage facility in Goleta, Calif., where she revealed a collection that included hundreds of her father's negatives, as well as a lifetime of correspondence. As Benton started sifting through the materials, it dawned on her that she was looking at work that had not been seen — including negatives of a young girl with a recognizable smudge on her cheek. It was Sara from "The Only Flowers of Her Youth," still poor but smiling and — lo and behold — wearing shoes.

“I stood there,” Benton said, “and thought, This is the real photographic record of Eastern European Jewish life.”

Shtetl is the Yiddish word for “town.” In the taxonomy of Eastern European Jewish habitats, it fell somewhere between a *shtot* (a city) and a *dorf* (a village). According to the Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer, about 30 to 40 percent of the three million Jews in Poland before the Holocaust lived in shtetls. Many other Jews lived in large, cosmopolitan cities like Warsaw and Vilna and Krakow. And yet in the popular imagination, the word *shtetl* has become nearly synonymous with pre-Holocaust life — a romantic image characterized by homogeneity and quaintness. This sentimentalization — driven in part by secularized, often prosperous Jews troubled by the sense that their hard-earned modernity may have come at the price of tradition and authenticity — began as far back as the 19th century and traveled with Jews from the Pale of Settlement to the shores of America. At the start of the last century, Yiddish newspapers and plays in America treated the shtetl with both love and condescension — too close a memory not to feel homesick for, yet too obviously backward to reclaim.

But this delicate balance was upset by the Holocaust, which twisted ambivalent affection into paralytic grief. After the war, it became difficult to view prewar images as anything but a prelude to destruction — a backshadowing that distilled the complicated, multifaceted reality of prewar Jewish life into a two-dimensional shrine, one that deserved all the mournful appreciation that could be mustered. In January 1945, the rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel gave a seminal speech at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York about prewar Eastern European Jewish life. It was not a factual exploration of this historical subject but rather a lyrical interpretation of what Heschel claimed was the essence of Eastern European Jewish life: its soul. “Heschel argued that though the Eastern European Jews were destroyed, their spiritual legacy lives on,” explains Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor of performance studies at New York University who has done scholarship on Eastern European Jewish culture. “It is indestructible, unassailable — something the Germans could never get their hands on.” In fact, she added, the physical destruction was barely mentioned. At the end of Heschel’s speech, the audience broke into a spontaneous recitation of the Kaddish, or mourner’s prayer.

As audience members filed out of the hall, they may have seen an array of prewar photographs by Vishniac, which were on display at the institute at the time. And so it is most likely no accident that an edited version of Heschel’s speech would be used two years later as the foreword to a book conceived that year: Vishniac’s “Polish Jews,” published by Schocken. The lack of detail in Vishniac’s captions made his pictures the perfect partner for Heschel’s argument. Both men set aside the earthbound conventions of factual detail in service of a more profound takeaway message, one that reached beyond history to elegy. Together they offered a representation of this universe radically slanted toward the poetic — “a life abjectly poor in its material condition, and in its spiritual condition, exaltedly religious,” in the words of the preface to “Polish Jews.”

Shortly after the book was published, Vishniac returned in earnest to his first love: photomicroscopy, the photography of specimens as seen through a microscope. A pioneer in the field, Vishniac was known for his expertise in capturing images of live subjects. In 1955, *The New Yorker* published an extensive two-part profile of Vishniac, focused primarily on his scientific work. “No one who hasn’t tried it can comprehend the careful planning, the diabolical perseverance and the incredible skill it takes to obtain the results he gets,” the magazine quoted Philippe Halsman, former president of the American Society of Magazine Photographers, as saying of Vishniac. “The man is a special kind of genius.” The profile also described Vishniac’s domestic life. After arriving in New York in 1940, he and his family settled on the Upper West Side. Six years later the couple divorced, and Vishniac remarried. The story mentioned Vishniac’s pride in his son, Wolf, a Ph.D. in microbiology and a professor at Yale, whose accomplishments were detailed in almost a full

paragraph. The section ended with only a brief mention of the photographer's other child: "Vishniac's daughter, Mara, seems to have been less stirred by the world as seen through a microscope; she is married to a mechanical engineer named Otto Schiff, has two children and lives in Ohio."

Indeed by that time Mara Vishniac was fairly uninvested in her father's work. For starters, her parents' divorce had not been easy on her. "My mother lived on 72nd Street, and my father lived on 81st," she recalled recently. "I must have paced a groove on Broadway between those streets." Though she avoids discussion of her father's flaws, he was, by the accounts of many others, a difficult man. In addition to his charisma and obvious talents, he was also known to possess what Howard Greenberg, Vishniac's longtime gallerist, identified as "one of the bigger egos on the planet."

But Mara Vishniac's involvement with her father's work would eventually be forced upon her under tragic circumstances. In 1973, Wolf Vishniac, on an expedition to Antarctica, fell off a 500-foot cliff and died. Aside from the pain of losing her only sibling, Mara was left with responsibility for the family's legacy. "It suddenly hit me, I'm going to have to deal with this," she said. "It was an overwhelming shock. There were literally thousands of items that I knew nothing about." In addition to his scientific work and Eastern European photography, her father amassed numerous collections: Far Eastern art, coins, textiles and more than 600 rare books. By the time Benton found her in January 2001, Mara had divorced her first husband, remarried (to Walter Kohn, a 1998 Nobel laureate in chemistry) and moved to Santa Barbara — all the while heroically caring for her father's vast, unwieldy inheritance.

As Benton has learned, Vishniac's inheritance is large, with many parts undated or randomly annotated. Strips of negatives have been cut into individual shots, which have made it grueling to reconstruct rolls.

But the collection is also a gold mine. Not only do the unpublished photographs offer a kaleidoscopic view of prewar Jewish life — women in modern dress and men without hats, religious people comfortably consorting with secular people, shopkeepers with plenty of wares — they also convey a fuller sense of the photographer's artistic abilities. The result is surprising: Vishniac, who often strained to present himself as superior to others, in fact never showed the world some of his best work. He shot in a variety of styles, not simply the plaintive perspective for which he became famous. Benton cites a picture of two houses in a Carpathian mountain town. "No one would look at this and think Vishniac," she said. "There's a compositional acuity about this photo that is just tremendous — and shocking." As far as Benton is concerned, she has stumbled upon an artist who deserves to be in the canon of great 20th-century social-documentary photography, on par with Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange.

But not all of her discoveries have been flattering. Benton has also found evidence that Vishniac did not take nearly as many pictures as he claimed, that certain photographs may have been staged and, most difficult for some of Vishniac's ardent fans, that he most likely did not use a hidden camera. Taking a loupe to certain pictures, Benton noticed, in the eyes of the subjects, the reflection of Vishniac standing before them with a camera over his face. Other claims have required only common sense to refute, like Vishniac's assertion that he took moving footage with a camera hidden in a valise. "Have you seen film cameras from that time?" Benton notes. "They're not exactly camcorders you can just stick in your purse."

The most extensive falsification, however, is in the captions, the bulk of which Vishniac wrote after the war. Many include incredibly vivid details — too vivid — as well as dramatic narratives that either could not have happened or could not have happened the way Vishniac presented them.

Even the selection of what Vishniac chose to publish now seems, broadly, like a distortion. “It’s as if we took pictures of homeless people in New York and then the city fell into the sea, and 50 years from now people looked at those photos and thought, That’s what New York was,” Benton says.

When Benton raised the subject of the falsifications, Vishniac Kohn expressed little surprise. Her father always spun tales, she told me, particularly about his own experiences. Still, Vishniac Kohn had not seen proof that her father’s penchant for storytelling extended to his work. And yet, rather than suppressing the coming revision, she encouraged Benton to press on, to construct as accurate an understanding of her father’s archive as possible — no matter the consequences. She knew that Benton was approaching her father’s work with the utmost respect. “The first time Maya came to work here,” Vishniac Kohn says, “she found a negative that was partially destroyed. She walked out the door into the garden and cried. It told me everything I needed to know.”

Benton also began talking with Vishniac Kohn about the archive’s future. It seemed to make the most sense to offer it to the International Center of Photography, which already had a substantial number of Vishniac prints — the result of his long friendship with the institution’s founder, Cornell Capa.

The two men met in 1966 — at which point, Capa later told *The New York Times*, he “discovered how undiscovered” Vishniac was. Capa, who saw Vishniac’s work in the context of his own philosophy of social-action photography, set out to rectify this situation. In 1971, Capa curated an exhibit of Vishniac’s work at the Jewish Museum, and a year later he included Vishniac in a volume he edited of work by leading “concerned photographers,” including Bruce Davidson, Hiroshi Hamaya, Donald McCullin and W. Eugene Smith.

Capa’s “rediscovery” of Vishniac could not have come at a more propitious moment. Two years before the two men met, the atomized Jewish nostalgia for Eastern Europe that was percolating for decades reached a culmination of sorts in “*Fiddler on the Roof*,” the wildly successful musical loosely based on a series of short stories by Sholem Aleichem. Over the course of its eight-year run on Broadway, the play solidified the shtetl as an icon in the popular imagination. In 1974, a sales executive at Schocken Books penned a memo supporting a proposal for a new book of Eastern European Jewish photography with Vishniac’s work as its core. He couldn’t have been clearer about his motivation: “With a good text . . . we would have an illustrated book of social history that would also appeal to a popular Jewish nostalgia market.”

A few years later, Michael di Capua, an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux who worked on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “*Day of Pleasure*”— which was illustrated with 17 Vishniac photographs — began editing a new volume of Vishniac’s work, under the title “*A Vanished World*.” But by the 1980s, the attention Vishniac received in the wake of his friendship with Capa had enhanced the photographer’s natural tendency toward self-aggrandizement. When Vishniac gave di Capua his captions, a red light went off. “In the course of many hours working with Vishniac, it began to seem that he had become a mythmaker of his past — telling stories that were better than what really happened,” di Capua told me in January. Since it was assumed that many of the subjects in the pictures had been murdered, di Capua could no more prove that the captions were false than Vishniac could prove they were true. So di Capua came up with a solution: he would feature Vishniac’s fantastical commentary in an isolated index at the front of the book. “If I could keep that baloney away from the pictures, at least that would solve something,” di Capua said. “I do believe I managed to get the worst of it out.”

When I spoke to di Capua, now an award-winning publisher with his own imprint at Scholastic Books, he sounded almost relieved to hear of Benton’s discoveries. As we were about to get off the phone, he reached for his copy of “*A Vanished World*” and opened it. “I’m cringing that I even

let this go in,” he said, referring to a photograph of a man carrying a Torah. The caption asserts that the scroll was needed by a family sitting shiva. “Well,” di Capua said, “it could be true, but really, who the hell knows?”

Late one Sunday night in January, I met Benton at the International Center of Photography. She desperately wanted me to see a set of vintage Vishniac prints recently lent to her by a man whose father worked at the Joint Distribution Committee in the 1930s and '40s. As she laid them out on a conference table, with the lights of the city flickering behind her, I saw everything in them that she saw. They were luminous and exciting: a shot of a young boy dunking his hand in a bucket overflowing with herring; a female weaver with a modern bob held back with a glowing bobby pin; a pastry-filled bakery that could easily be mistaken for one of Eugène Atget's Paris scenes. At the far end of the table, I recognized something — or, rather, someone. It was the “father” from the father-and-son spread at the end of “A Vanished World,” here rescued from the strictures of the crop in which I first encountered him. In the fullness of this original shot, he appeared not as a man crazed with fear but as one simply looking curiously out onto the world beyond the metal door.

For some, the repositioned Vishniac archive will, when revealed to the public in an exhibition in 2012, be a litmus test of a sort: embracing it requires the abrogation of nostalgia, but in return it offers engagement with the true past and the enrichment this brings to life in the present. “Jews should be absolutely elated — and not at all surprised — to discover that Jewish life in Poland was like human society anywhere, in that it contained all the human types and all of the human experiences,” Wieseltier, the *New Republic* literary editor, says. “Will they resent being deprived by the full historical record of the holy beards and the mystical sparks, or will they have the wisdom to say, ‘Good, they were blessedly like all of us’?”

For Benton, too, the remaining mystery is not about Vishniac but about his audience — then and now. “What’s interesting to me is less Vishniac’s tendency toward mythology than the Jewish need to have those mythologies and the attachment they have to them, even in the face of evidence to the contrary,” Benton says. “Why are people so attached to the other story? The real story is so much better.”

The Shtetl, Reconsidered *by Eric Herschthal*

The Jewish Week. Tuesday, November 2, 2010
<http://www.thejewishweek.com/>

A new generation of scholars is upending traditional notions of Jewish ‘memory’ and why Jews left Eastern Europe. When the historian Rebecca Kobrin began researching her book “Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora,” which came out this spring, she was struck by the strange way Eastern European Jewish immigrants used words like “exile” and “diaspora.” Between 1880 and 1914, when most of America’s Jews came over from Europe, they did not speak about exile in terms of Israel, as we often do now. They used those words instead in relation to the places they actually left: Bialystok, Vilna, Warsaw, Lodz.

“We have this impression that Jews have always felt exiled from the land of Israel,” Kobrin, a professor at Columbia, said in a recent interview. “But that’s ahistorical.” She added, “East European Jewry did not always use the term ‘galut’ — Hebrew for “exile” — “to refer to their exile from Israel. They used it to describe their personal feelings of displacement from their lived homeland.”

That is a central argument of her book, which she will speak about at the Center for Jewish History and Bookculture this week. But one of her underlying motives, and one shared by many of her colleagues, is to wrest Jewish history from the maw of communal Jewish issues. Kobrin is careful to note, however, that her work is not politically motivated, only that it is framed in contrast to the present. “I have no comment on Zionism or Israel today,” she said. “Rather, I hope my book captures a world of East European Jewry a century ago.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union was supposed to usher in a new understanding of Jewish history. Materials that scholars had been unable to view for decades were now available for the first time. But it is not the lack of sources that is preventing them from successfully recasting the history of Eastern Europe’s Jews, which made up more than 99 percent of world Jewry before the First World War.

Many historians now view the stubborn hold of contemporary Jewish politics as the main impediment. Israel, the Holocaust and anti-Semitism — touchstones of contemporary Jewish politics, as well as popular history, or what academics call “memory” — have stymied an accurate portrayal of the Jewish past in ways historians never thought possible. “American [Jewish] memory is constituted by two things,” said ChaeRan Freeze, a professor of East European Jewry at Brandeis, “the Zionist master narrative and nostalgia. We’re trying to revise that.”

By “Zionist master narrative,” she was referring to Israeli or Zionist historians who, in the past, have emphasized the bleakness of Eastern European life in order to justify the need for a Jewish state. Freeze stressed that, for American Jews, an idealized, simpler shtetl life, sentimentalized in works like “Fiddler on the Roof,” is the more dominant misconception. Still, both images are in large part shaped by the Holocaust and the imperatives of a Jewish state. Yet whatever the case, historians feel it difficult to break through these still-too-popular myths.

“What you’re touching on is the most sensitive nerve-endings of Jewish memory,” said Steven Zipperstein, a professor of Russian Jewish history at Stanford. He added, “It’s not as if there isn’t any veracity to the popular perception,” but many popular conceptions “are not sufficiently accurate. And that’s where historians fit in.”

One of the most hotly contested issues to emerge is whether pogroms were the most compelling factor leading Jews to emigrate from Europe.

Zipperstein, who is now writing a cultural history of Russian Jewry to be published by Houghton Mifflin, echoed many of his colleagues when he argued that pogroms were not nearly as common as believed. Of the roughly 2.5 million Jews who left Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1914 — 70 percent of whom came to America — most immigrated for economic reasons.

There is still debate about whether Jews came to America because it offered ample economic opportunity, especially as its economy took off after the Civil War. Or whether it was mostly discriminatory policies in czarist Russia that pushed them there, like the May Laws of 1882, which prohibited Jews from buying land outside the Pale of Settlement. But “by and large,” Zipperstein said, “the economic motive was the main reason Jews left up until the First World War.”

Zipperstein's own research has focused on the notorious Kishinev pogrom in 1903, where 49 Jews were killed in two days of looting. The event was sparked by an accusation of the anti-Semitic blood libel, and was quickly seized on by the Western media. It was only after Kishinev that the word "pogrom" even entered the mainstream discourse.

But Zipperstein argues that the Kishinev pogrom, particularly in its basis on a medieval blood libel myth, was a rarity. More than 800,000 Jews had left Eastern Europe before the , and the ones who did mostly left small, economically depressed towns that had never experienced anti-Semitic violence.

Nonetheless, Kishinev "became for the much of the world at the time one of the most resonant symbols of Jewish oppression," Zipperstein said. Pogroms remain a symbol today of the Old World for an important reason, too — the Holocaust. Most historians agree that the annihilation of the Eastern European Jews, the apogee of European anti-Semitism, now overshadows all understanding of history that precedes it.

Moreover, Jewish historians who were writing the history of pre-Soviet Russia were killed in the Holocaust, leaving popular culture — from the Bernard Malamud's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "The Fixer" (1966) to Roman Vishniac's "A Vanished World" (1983) — to fill the gap.

Though anti-Semitism was unquestionably a fact of East European life, scholars are now at pains to show how it was only one factor causing Jews to immigrate, and one mainly exacerbated by deeper societal changes. "The serious point is that we continue to prefer the mythology of the shtetl at the expense of the modern history of Eastern European Jewry," said Olga Litvak, a professor of Russian Jewish history at Clark University. She will be contributing an essay on modern Eastern European Jewry for an upcoming eight-volume history of Judaism to be published by Cambridge University Press. Like many scholars working on the period, Litvak emphasized that in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Eastern Europe was beset by rapid modernization and political upheavals. As in other industrializing countries, Jews migrated to new cities looking for work, often joining revolutionary movements, like socialism, that were part of progressive, modernizing politics. Non-Jews left out of this modernizing process lashed out against Jews, and anyone else who was associated with change.

Even Yehuda Bauer, a prominent historian of the Holocaust, whose latest book, "The Death of the Shtetl," will be published in paperback this month, made this point in an interview from Israel. "The major causes [for immigration before the First World War] were the penetration of modernity," he said.

He was not, however, skittish about highlighting the pernicious reality of pogroms. During the Russian civil war that ensued after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, about 60,000 Jews were killed in a series of anti-Semitic riots in the following two years.

"The problem," Bauer said, "is that we remember the wrong pogrom," referring to Kishinev. Pogroms become a motivating factor for Jews to flee Eastern Europe mainly after the First World War, he said, not before it. But it is before 1914 that the vast majority of America's Jews arrived.

Still, many historians voiced concerns that anti-Semitism is now being minimized perhaps too much. "I think there is a concern that the new generation wants to blow off anti-Semitism," said Freeze, of Brandeis. "There is a sense that among younger scholars, they too easily dismiss or downplay anti-Semitism. [They feel] it's an old-topic," she added.

But even Freeze said that her own work tries to move past anti-Semitism as the main prism through which to view Eastern European life. She is currently putting together a book of court documents from czarist Russia, which she is co-editing with the Harvard scholar Jay M. Harris and will be published by Brandeis University Press next summer.

She highlighted one official document that listed an attack against a Jewish fruit salesman in the late-19th century as “an act of anti-Jewish violence.” But the facts of the case itself reveal that it was essentially about the salesman’s decision to raise the price of his plums. “If you paint it just as anti-Semitism,” Freeze said, “you miss the nuance of the situation. It doesn’t tell you anything.”

Historians are increasingly taking their case to the public as well. Antony Polonsky, a historian at Brandeis who published the second of a three-volume history of Eastern European Jewry earlier this year, said he is working on a shorter version for a wider audience. “I think we need to popularize our work,” he said. But he was fully aware that overcoming popular misconceptions was a formidable task. “I’m not sure how one does this well,” he said.

The Yeshiva University Museum, located inside the Center for Jewish History, opened a new exhibit recently titled “16 mm Postcards: Home Movies of American Jewish Visitors to 1930s Poland,” which paints a picture of pre-Holocaust Poland strikingly more modern than traditional image of “the shtetl.”

This summer, the “YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe” launched its free website, with hundreds of short, jargon-less articles written by scholars, as well as archival material. The purpose, said Gershon David Hundert, the chief editor of the encyclopedia, and a professor at McGill University, is “to make sure that the history of Eastern Europe’s Jews does not get reduced to Tevye and a guy in a black hat and beard.”

Still, he conceded that after public lectures he gives on his own, people often confront him confounded, confused or even angry. “You have people talk about their ancestors who came to North America in the 19th century and how they escaped pogroms in Vilna,” he said. He tells them politely that that is not possible. There were pogroms in Vilna in 1918, but in 19th-century Vilna, “there were no pogroms.”

The Crime of Surviving

by **Dovid Katz** (Tablet Magazine. May 3, 2010)

<http://www.tabletmag.com/news-and-politics/32432/the-crime-of-surviving/>

By arguing that Nazi and Soviet crimes are equal, Lithuania is airbrushing the Holocaust out of its history.

Rachel Margolis may be the most tragic Holocaust survivor on the planet. She has stiff competition, to be sure, but Margolis’s recent experiences are almost too surreal and painful to be believed. After the war—during which her parents and brother were murdered—Margolis decided to rebuild

her life in her native city of Vilna (now Vilnius), the capital of Lithuania. For more than 40 years, she taught biology at Vilnius University. After the Soviet Union collapsed and Lithuanian democracy permitted it, she helped found the city's only Holocaust museum and became one of its stalwart presences, returning to Lithuania to lecture each summer even after relocating to Israel in the mid-1990s. Now, at 88, Margolis is being defamed as a war criminal. Her crime? Surviving the Vilna ghetto to join the anti-Nazi resistance in the forests of Lithuania.

Margolis is one of a group of elderly survivors who have become pawns in a sinister game of Holocaust obfuscation by local authorities in the Baltic states—which, though they are among the smallest nations in Europe, had the highest rates of Holocaust genocide in Europe. A more complex phenomenon than Holocaust denial, obfuscation does not deny a single Jewish death at the hands of the Nazis. Instead, it uses as a starting point the idea that the Nazi genocide was not a unique event but rather a reaction to Soviet “genocide” (and antecedent to further Soviet genocide) in which the same elements of Lithuanian society that often sided with the Nazi invaders were persecuted and imprisoned by the Communist regime, whose officials included Jews.

The “double genocide” movement has gained the support of government and political parties in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe, which have invested substantial treasure to persuade the entire European Union to accept the equality of the Nazi Holocaust and Soviet crimes. Their biggest success has been the Prague Declaration, issued from a conference on “European Conscience and Communism” in June 2008, which demands that Europe “recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy”; that Communism be assessed “the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal”; that a single “day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes” be declared, thus effectively eliminating Holocaust Remembrance Day; and that European history textbooks be “overhauled” so that “children could learn and be warned about Communism and its crimes in the same way as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes.”

Signs of the movement's success are visible throughout Lithuania. The Museum of Genocide Victims on Vilnius's central boulevard mentions the word Holocaust only sparingly and glosses over events at a place called Ponar in Yiddish (now known as Paneriai), where 100,000 unarmed civilians, some 70,000 of them Jews, were murdered, mostly by local Lithuanian militia. Instead, Lithuania's Holocaust museum is devoted entirely to Soviet crimes. At a recent exhibition on the Ukrainian famine, a huge poster featured a woman telling visitors: “In Auschwitz we were given some spinach and a little bread. War is terrible, but famine is even worse.”

Two years ago, on Lithuania's independence day, neo-Nazis marched down the capital's central boulevard chanting “Juden raus,” or “Jews out,” and brandishing a specially modified Lithuanian swastika. (It has since become illegal in Lithuania to display Nazi or Soviet symbols.) Only after heavy pressure from local embassies—including those of the United States and other Western powers—did the country's leaders condemn the march, a week after it occurred. This year, on March 11, “Juden raus” was replaced by the slogan “*Lietuva Lietuviams*,” or Lithuania for Lithuanians, and it is not a fringe movement. The permit for the march was issued to Kazimieras Uoka, a signatory on Lithuania's March 11, 1990, declaration of independence and a member of parliament from the country's ruling coalition, the right-wing Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrat Political Group. Top officials said not a word until the Norwegian ambassador, Steinar Gil, protested on March 19, noting that 50 members of the country's parliament had protested a gay-rights march but not one objected to the neo-Nazis. The country's prime minister, Andrius Kubilius, replied on March 23, saying, “There are skinheads and neo-Nazis in every country, and they sometimes take a walk or chant something.”

Local authorities and government agencies have also instigated campaigns of slander and legal threats against elderly Jewish Holocaust survivors whose experiences fighting in the forests with Communist-backed partisans against the Nazis would appear to threaten the viability of the “double genocide” theory. “The only good Jew for them,” said Berl Glazer, 85, believed to be the only elderly Orthodox Jew left in Lithuania, “is a dead Jew.”

* * *

It took Shmuel Shragge, an 84-year-old former truck driver, three sentences to sum up the perversion of history that it has taken me—a Brooklyn-born professor who settled in Lithuania to set up the Yiddish-studies program at Vilnius University—close to a decade to understand. Shragge and his wife, Basye, 81, a retired medical doctor, are among the last of the prewar tribe of *Litvaks*, the Jews of Lithuania, whose seven centuries of history include some of the greatest achievements of European Jewish culture. On a recent visit to their modest, immaculate Soviet-era apartment in Kaunas, once known as Kovno and now Lithuania’s second-largest city, Shragge revealed what was for him one of the most horrific memories.

He stood up, walked across the room and picked off the top sheet of a stack of plain white paper. Before sitting back down, he abruptly tore the piece of paper in two and let the halves glide down to the floor. “That was one of the first atrocities I saw right at the beginning, before the Germans came, in the hours and days after war broke out here on June 22, 1941,” he said. I looked up at him, confused.

“The Soviet army was fleeing the German bombardment,” he explained. “But it would be some days before the Germans arrived. They took a young Jewish girl on the street and sawed her in half, like that piece of paper, and left the two halves to rot in the middle of the street, near the center of the city.”

Who was “they,” I asked? “*They* are the local Lithuanian ‘freedom fighters’ who were wearing the white arm bands of the Lithuanian Activist Front, who got the Holocaust going here by starting to murder Jewish civilians throughout the country before the Germans even arrived. Today they are honored as ‘heroes against the Soviets’ as if the Soviets were running from them.”

But maybe these first Holocaust murders were directed against Jews who had been sympathetic to, or collaborators with, the Soviet occupiers who had taken over Lithuania a year before? “Oh no, those guys ran away together with the Soviet army,” he answered. “The massacres of Jews started with old rabbis and young women as the main targets.”

Today, Shragge said, relations with his Lithuanian neighbors are excellent, though he added that there is a lot of anti-Semitism in the country. I asked him who the anti-Semites are. “The big shots,” he said. “The government, editors, professors, television people. Instead of wanting to understand what actually happened and to teach it truthfully to young people today, they are obsessed with mixing everything up and claiming that Nazism and Communism were equal. But you only have to scratch them to hear that all Jews were Communists and got what they deserved, and that Communism was the real genocide here.”

Since independence, the Lithuanian government has avoided returning prewar communal property, making it arguably the only country in the European Union to fail to enact restitution to the Jewish community. However, egged on by Emanuelis Zingeris, an ambitious Jewish member of parliament and a member of the dominant right-wing party, the state has also been toying with ideas to develop the Vilna ghetto as a Jewish-themed tourist park. Supporters of the project call it “Fragments.” Opponents, principally in the Jewish community, dub it the “Dead Jew Disneyland

Park.” The state has also funded Jewish-themed statues, cultural events, and plaques designating historic buildings.

Lithuania’s contradictory “Jewish affairs policy”—which it shares with its Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, and with right-wing nationalist factions in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—originates in the desire to airbrush the Holocaust out of history. This wish is intimately intertwined with Eastern Europe’s special kind of anti-Semitism, which maintains a love for Israeli, American, and other Western Jews, as well as for the prewar Jewish heritage but loathes present-day Jewish communities. At the heart of that loathing is the sin of memory: Local Jews know that the few Jews who survived did so thanks to the Soviet Union, while local nationalists sided with Hitler and carried out much of the killing.

The presence of so few local Jews is, in part, what has made it so easy for the double genocide theory, and its corollary of Holocaust obfuscation, to take root. Ignored by both the Jewish and Western worlds—with the important exception of the Simon Wiesenthal Center—the double genocide movement has begun to spread to major international organizations. Last July, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued the Vilnius Declaration, which included a number of the most noxious elements from the Prague Declaration. The declaration takes the assumptions of the double genocide movement as a given by referring to “two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide.” Moreover, it calls explicitly for a combined “Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism,” which, observers point out, would inevitably replace Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Shamefully, the United States was among the nations that voted for ratification of this deliberate distortion of history, which is intended to whitewash the crimes of local right-wing elements in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust by eliminating the memory of the Holocaust itself. When I spoke to several visiting U.S. congressmen and senators during their visit to Vilnius for the conference, it was obvious that they did not have the vaguest idea about the implications of U.S. approval of the declaration. Among them were Senators George Voinovich and Benjamin Cardin, who had spoken out forcefully in support of the Jewish position on restitution of communal property and against anti-Semitism. But the bigger issue, the revision of European history to delete the Holocaust, went unnoticed.

* * *

Holocaust obfuscation is the perverted product of the attempt to encourage the states of the Baltics and Eastern Europe to confront the history of World War II—including local collaboration with the Nazis. In the late 1990s, as part of their European accession bids, Eastern European states found themselves pressured by NATO and the European Union to commemorate the Holocaust. In response, the three Baltic states each set up “red-brown commissions,” panels charged with studying both Soviet and Nazi crimes. The Lithuanian commission, with the Orwellian name the “International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania,” has the most notorious history of all. Housed in the prime minister’s office, the commission succeeded in attracting Israeli Holocaust scholar Yitzhak Arad, who is the founding director of Yad Vashem, a Holocaust survivor, and a hero of the anti-Nazi partisan resistance.

In joining the group, Arad was given assurances of academic independence. But in April 2006, the Lithuanian daily *Respublika* called Arad a war criminal for having fought with the anti-Nazi Soviets. Within months, the state’s prosecutors began an investigation into Arad. After an international outcry, part of the investigation was dropped in the fall of 2008. Prosecutors issued a statement calling on “the public” to provide more evidence, citing an anonymous “expert historian” who attacked a book Arad had published in 1979. Observers were puzzled. Arad quit the commission

and is now listed on its website as having his “membership suspended.” In protest against the entire enterprise, another member of the commission, British historian Martin Gilbert, resigned.

But this turmoil at the commission was only the beginning. On May 5, 2008, following demands made earlier that year in the daily *Lietuvos Aidas*, state prosecutors sent armed police to look for two Jewish female Holocaust survivors, both veterans of the anti-Nazi partisan resistance. One, 87-year-old Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky, is a librarian at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

The other was Rachel Margolis. As a researcher at the local Holocaust museum, Margolis had made a sensational rediscovery of the diary of a Christian Pole named Kazimierz Sakowicz, who witnessed thousands of murders at Ponar. Sakowicz reported that the volunteer killers were mostly locals. For this discovery and the subsequent publication of the diary in 1999 (Yale University Press brought out an English edition in 2005), Margolis had become a target of hatred for those who adhere to the ideology of a “double genocide.”

Both women had been incarcerated in the Vilna ghetto, and both lost their parents and siblings in the Holocaust. Both escaped the ghetto on different dates in September 1943, and both joined Soviet-sponsored anti-Nazi partisans in the forest. It was this last fact that enabled prosecutors to allege in “pre-trial investigations” that the two women should be considered war criminals for having fought with the Soviets.

Like Arad, Brantsovsky and Margolis were investigated for war crimes without any charges or specific allegations, just innuendo based on published Holocaust memoirs. “At least the anti-Semites finally began to read our memoirs,” Margolis told me.

The defamation campaign against Lithuanian Holocaust survivors reached a peak at the end of May 2008, when prosecutors told the media that the two women could not be located. This gave rise to Internet posts claiming “the Jews hide their own criminals.” But Fania Brantsovsky works at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, a minute’s walk from the presidential palace, and Rachel Margolis is easily reachable in Rechovot. Both were found in minutes during the course of reporting this piece.

When confronted, chief prosecutor Rimvydas Valentukevicius, from the Division of Special Investigations at the Prosecutor General’s Office of Lithuania, told Swedish journalist Arne Bengtsson: “We are investigating criminal activities, which could be crimes against humanity. The information has to be checked. It is a normal procedure. I see nothing political in that. Why is there so much interest in them? Is it only because they are Jewish?” In reply to this oft-repeated prosecutorial rejoinder to press inquiries, Shimon Alperovich, 81, chairman of the Jewish community of Lithuania, wrote in a widely circulated public letter: “The prosecutors in Lithuania do not cease to persecute anti-Nazi Jewish partisans. The Prosecution Service’s claims that ‘hundreds of witnesses are being questioned’ are belied by the fact that only Jewish names are ever heard in the media: Yitzhak Arad, Fania Brantsovsky, Rachel Margolis, and others.”

Thankfully, there has been one fortunate wrinkle to this story. For those who believe in double genocide, it is important to have a paper trail of investigations into “Soviet Jewish partisans” to “equal” investigations into Nazi war criminals—and, in Lithuania, this effort has recently gone spectacularly wrong. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western embassies in Eastern Europe began to honor persons hounded by state prosecutors. The Irish ambassador, Donal Denham, boldly hosted a reception at his residence within weeks of police questioning Brantsovsky. Then-U.S. Ambassador John Cloud issued Brantsovsky a certificate of honor. The British and Norwegian ambassadors recruited Brantsovsky to lead walks through the former Vilna ghetto for the Lithuanian capital’s diplomatic corps. The president of Germany awarded

Brantsovsky the Federal Cross of Merit last October. Within minutes of the award's presentation, Lithuania's main Internet news portal published a vicious attack calling Brantsovsky a mass murderer.

The state's prosecution service will neither charge nor clear Rachel Margolis for her "crime" of surviving the Vilna ghetto, putting her in a legal limbo, which in effect makes it impossible for her to visit the country where she was born and where her parents are buried. "Tell your readers," she told me, "that the anti-Semites will never succeed to turn history upside down, because the free world knows the truth. They know who the Nazis were and they know who the victims were. It's really very simple." She adds one more thing, from her home in Israel: "Tell them that I want to return once more to see my hometown, Vilna."

Dovid Katz is the research director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute and a cofounder of the Litvak Studies Institute. He is the author of *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* and the website, < <http://holocaustinthebaltics.com/>. >

German Army Honors Jews Who Fought In World War I

by Jack Ewing

The New York Times, November 8, 2010

FRANKFURT - German soldiers, including one wearing a yarmulke, filed silently through a leaf-covered cemetery in Frankfurt on Sunday to lay wreaths at a memorial for Jewish soldiers killed fighting for the kaiser during World War I.

The ceremony, the first public service at the site for as long as anyone here can remember, was organized by the Association of Jewish Soldiers, a small but growing group in the German military whose existence testifies to the feeling by at least some Jews that it is possible for them to serve in the organization that once tried to wipe them out.

"More and more young Jews are placing their trust in the army," Gideon Romer-Hillebrecht, a general staff officer in the Defense Ministry and deputy chairman of the Jewish soldiers' association, told the ceremony.

Michael Berger, chairman of the group and an army captain, said that although there was no exact count of Jewish soldiers, there were no more than about 200 of them. While all young German men are subject to conscription, they can choose to perform civilian public service instead.

Abraham Ben, the son of a concentration camp survivor who has helped organize similar events in Munich, said that he saw no problem with Jews serving in the modern German Army.

"Ten years ago I would have given you a different answer," he said. But, he said, "Jews in Germany are no longer sitting around with their bags packed. This is home."

The memorial, a semicircular stone marker erected in 1925, honors 467 of the 12,000 Jewish soldiers who died fighting on the German side in World War I. Many Jews hoped that military service would promote their acceptance into German society, according to speakers at the memorial and a panel discussion afterward. But after the war, Nazi myths blamed Jewish treachery for Germany's defeat.



Salomon Korn, vice chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany, read from the diary of a Jewish soldier in World War I who was recommended for the Iron Cross by one commander but had to listen to another refer to Jews as "cowardly dogs."



As part of the ceremony on Sunday, unarmed soldiers in long gray wool coats walked two abreast in a light drizzle through the otherwise deserted cemetery. After the soldiers laid wreaths at the memorial, a military bugler played a mournful tune. The names of 50 soldiers buried nearby were read aloud, and a rabbi said a prayer.

The Jewish community & the German Army took part in a ceremony for fallen Jewish soldiers from Frankfurt who served with the Germans in WW I.

The memorial, with lettering in Hebrew and German, was partly restored after large pieces were found two months ago embedded in the surrounding earth, said Major Szanckower, the cemetery director. But the memorial is still missing large chunks, and Sunday also marked the beginning of an effort to fully restore it.

Mr. Szanckower said it was not clear whether the memorial had been damaged by vandals or by age and weather.

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