

Lita and what remains: networks and tunnels, from literature to film to history to archaeology

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Introduction

Please indulge my opening on a personal note. Our much-loved colleague, Richard Freund, could be impetuous. Richard was Richard. He got excited, animated and fired up, by fresh ideas and—for almost anyone else--daunting challenges. He loved meeting new people, young and old, from undergraduates to emeriti and establishing connections. Richard fleshed out and refined his research, to a greater extent than many other scholars, in public forums such as conference panels. He had real discussions, with give-and-take. He was imaginative and persistent in eliciting insights and expertise of professionals and researchers in fields totally distinct from his own, such as geology and radiology. He was utterly fearless, yet never feckless, charging into uncharted territory. The scope of his endeavors and consequential range of his publications, from antiquity to the Holocaust, is astounding, unmatched in Jewish Studies and possibly any other academic field. I will focus here on the main area of overlap between us: Jewry in Lithuania.

For this chapter in honor and memory of Richard my objectives are two-fold. First, I wish to modestly illuminate the work Richard accomplished on the Holocaust in Lithuania. My initial remarks here are mainly geared to those who teach the Holocaust and modern Jewish history. After all, Richard was a great teacher, and, as much as he loved research and public engagement, he also relished teaching in the classroom. In the most basic sense, I will present books and a film which colleagues may wish to integrate in their courses. I seek to convey lesser-known, diverse perspectives on the Holocaust in Lithuania which bear on Richard's concerns. My purpose is to begin discussions which, I believe, can assist in putting Richard's "digging" into context and sketch out further areas of consideration. Despite the fact that all these works to be named were, and remain, in numerous respects 'successful,' I feel that each of them are underappreciated. These books and their authors, and the film, might be accorded greater attention in teaching and public presentations of the Holocaust than is now the case.

I also shall share elements of my research, some of which is interwoven in my family history. After the launch of Operation Barbarossa, with the onset of the Holocaust per se in the spring of 1941, some distant members of my family were murdered in two of the fortresses surrounding Kovno. More immediately, my great-grandparents, my father's mother's parents, Menahem-Mendel and Fania (Jasvojn) Berk, were dispatched from their village, Pasmusvys, to Krakes—on a horse-drawn wagon--where they were murdered by a detachment of Nazi Einstazgruppe A. Their deaths figure into the now-infamous Jäger Report detailing the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry. From the tallies we learn that in Krakes, the 2nd of September 1941, 448 Jewish men, 476 Jewish women, and 201 Jewish children were massacred. Sakhot (Saukotas), birthplace of my grandfather, and Pasmusvys, my grandmother's hometown, do not appear in the Jäger report, as such tiny places were eclipsed by the larger nearby towns where the Jews were slaughtered. That very same day my

great-grandparents were killed, the ancestral home of Fania's father, Jasvanai, served as a mass murder site for its own and neighboring Jews, with 86 Jewish men, 110 Jewish women, and 86 Jewish children as victims.

This photograph, with my great-grandparents at the center, was taken in Pасusvys in 1909, after my grandmother, Edith, departed for the United States, in order to meet her husband, Moses. **figure 1. Pасusvys, 1909**



In retrospect it is a "Holocaust" photo even though it predates the Great War. The photo played a large role in the reconstruction of my family's history, which is similar to that of Dan Jacobson's photograph of his grandfather, Heshel, to be discussed below.

My ongoing research also includes the shinier lives and work of a particular branch of my family, the Jasvoins. This was the paternal side of my previously mentioned great-grandmother, Fania—in the white-spotted blouse. Spanning at least three generations, several of the Jasvoins were photographers who ran photography studios and photo equipment shops in Kovno and smaller cities. It seems likely that the 1909 photograph was taken by someone who came up from the shop in Kovno. The most famous of the clan was Wulf Jasvojn, after whom my own father, William Berkowitz (1917-1995), was named. Growing up in Rochester, New York, the home of Eastman Kodak Company, I thought it was

joke when someone said that my grandmother's grandfather was "photographer to the Tsar." Wulf was, really and truly, one of the photographers in the court of the Tsar. He had a studio in St Petersburg which was across the street from the Faberge headquarters—minutes from the Hermitage museum. While comprising a vastly different realm of ingenuity compared to that of, say, the Vilna Gaon, photography is an area of Jewish vitality and enterprise which had lasting repercussions. The intersection of Jews and photography is only beginning to capture attention as an academic subfield.¹

In sum, what follows seeks to bring attention to historically-informed literature that might be helpful for those who teach about the Holocaust. The impetus is the Richard I met in 1988, when he was figuring out how to turn his unwieldy doctoral dissertation into a book (or two, or more).² Richard was keen to explore how Jewish ethics played out beyond religious realms per se. Richard and I forcefully agreed about the usefulness of literature in teaching Jewish Studies and not shying away from fiction in "history" classes. I also will briefly refer to an exhibition catalogue and documentary film which complement Richard's exploits.

My second main task will be to zoom in—and respectfully take issue with—a dimension of Richard's research and writing on escapes, by Jewish prisoners, in Lithuania. I will emphasize a different interpretive lens from that advanced by Richard.

To conclude, I will sketch some of subjects that I had hoped to explore in-depth with Richard, in the time we never got to share in Lithuania.

Literary matters

A memoir that both coincided with, and helped to shape my own research is that of my colleague and friend, Dan Jacobson (1929-2014), *Heshel's Kingdom* (1998). Dan was a novelist and professor of literature at University College London (UCL), where I have been teaching in the Department of Hebrew & Jewish Studies since 1997. *Heshel's Kingdom* traces Dan's quest to flesh out his family's origins in Lithuania, South Africa, and beyond. It is the one of the finest in a now-crowded genre—which Dan, inadvertently, helped to launch. Please allow me to dwell on a part of Dan's life that is not examined in *Heshel's Kingdom*, despite its confessional nature. I wish to make a point about both Dan and Richard.

With sincere respect to those who have spoken and written of the passing of both of these wonderful men: many have missed something really big. First, Dan. He was crazy, utterly meshuggeh, about tennis. He played doubles Saturday mornings at Parliament Hill (in London, near his home in Highgate.) One of the foursome, invariably, was the scientist Lewis Wolpert (1929-2021), another South African. For Dan it wasn't just something he did or did for exercise. It was one of the most critical parts of his being. It was in his *kishkas*. He really cared about his tennis game.

Richard, too, was serious about sport. He ran—sprints and long distance. He swam. He even tried out for the Olympics, as an aspiring member of Israel's national squad. When he was physically able Richard engaged in intense physical exercise, not simply for the sake of exercise. Now comes the connection to this particular scholarly reflection on Richard: although Richard portrayed it as "resistance," I believe that there was something about the sheer physicality

of the tunnel-digging during the Holocaust which also moved him so profoundly. Richard, as a serious athlete, appreciated the dexterity and strength required to have shifted the earth in such ways. In other words: along with their books and intellectualism, the physicality of Richard and Dan should be recalled in order to gain a fuller sense of them as people.

I believe I had read *Heshel's Kingdom* before I met Dan. I had the book with me when I first went to Lithuania. Certainly I talked about Dan and *Heshel's Kingdom* with Chaim Bargman, my guide, who had previously shown Dan around Kaunas and provincial Lithuania—notably, to the villages where Dan's family lived before their emigration to the United States, South Africa, and Britain. Later Dan admitted that he had been somewhat ungenerous to Chaim—who he refers to as "Shlomo" in his memoir. **{figure 2. Chaim Bargman; photo by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}**



Like hundreds of other Litvaks from the 1980s on, my experience in the country was shaped by Chaim as my guide. Chaim's mother, Gita, was among the small cohort of survivors of the Kovno ghetto. Chaim grew up in Sovietized Kaunas. Trained as an engineer, Chaim considers himself an amateur historian. One of the reasons why I continued to call on him when I took student groups is because I believe that Chaim is in a class of his own in knowledge about both the history of the Jews in Lithuania and about the Holocaust. The later discussion of the escape from the 9th Fort in Kaunas, and the close of this chapter, will draw heavily on what I've learned from Chaim.

Despite the smug put-downs, Dan described Chaim as "indispensable" and, bestowing high praise indeed, he wrote that Chaim, in preparing for Dan's mission

had done his homework. Though no one before me had ever asked for his help in getting to Varniai, my

grandfather's little town, or to Kelme, my great-grandfather's bigger one, he had discovered that in each of them there remained 'one last Jew' whom we should make it our business to meet. Which in due course we did. He also took us to places we would never have found without his help, among them those overgrown double tracks through the woods that led to some of the numberless, nameless, fenced-off areas, each with a dated stone inside it, which marked what he invariably called a 'mass massacre' site.

It was clear from the way he said the two words that he firmly believed 'mass' and 'massacre' to be organically connected to one another, though a common root. Who could blame him for the error? Or would choose to correct it?³

In the grand scheme of things, as a work of literature *Heshel's Kingdom* did very well—with stellar reviews in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Guardian*. But with the exception of penetrating articles by Amy Simon and Murray Baumgarten,⁴ it does not seem to get much play in Jewish Studies and the history of the Holocaust. It is nearly impossible to think of a course in modern Jewish history, immigration, or the Holocaust that would not benefit, immensely, from having students think and write about *Heshel's Kingdom*.

The next selection from historically-infused literature is *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald (2001). I picked up *Austerlitz* having only a vague sense of the book and was surprised to discover both its historical complexity and some rather personal connections. It is a work of fiction. But it seems based, however loosely, on one or more people who were known to the author. Perhaps Sebald took fragments of several persons and re-worked them into *Austerlitz*. For those who are unfamiliar: the chief character, we learn, arrived in Britain in the *Kindertransport*. This event brought around 10,000 unaccompanied children to the country in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the "night of the broken glass" of November 9 and 10, 1938. The protagonist had a none-too-happy life, with the rural non-Jewish family that took him into their home and farm in Wales. A bright boy, Austerlitz made his way to university and through graduate school, becoming a professor of architectural history at the Warburg Institute.

The real-life Warburg Institute is seconds away from my office, a part of the Institute of Advanced Study of the University of London. In the early 2000s I did research there for my book, *The Crime of My Very Existence* (2007), surveying pamphlets spewing antisemitism that Aby Warburg (1866-1929) had saved for posterity. He thought that these, too, should have a place in his library and research institute dedicated to all human thought and science, including highly irrational schemes of understanding societies and the cosmos. After Warburg's death and the rise to power of the Nazis, the Warburg Institute was moved from Hamburg to London. I have argued that this comprised one of the greatest feats of intellectual migration of all time.⁵

So Austerlitz becomes a professor at the Warburg, a stone's throw from me. As if that isn't enough of a coincidence: he has a very cluttered office, which looks a great deal like my own (43). But there are even more coincidences, despite Austerlitz being at least thirty years older than myself. He is interested in the built environment, and the uses that the

Nazis made of the structures they found. Austerlitz is taken by Fort Breendonk, between Brussels and Antwerp—which he learns was a point of transit for his parents. Breendonk had also come up in my own research as a destination for Jewish partisans who were deemed "criminals" by the Nazis. Austerlitz later determines that his mother was transported from Breendonk to Theresienstad, a transit-camp, ghetto, and concentration camp. We learn that his father, Maximilian Aychenwald, was sent to the 9th Fort in Kaunas.

The fictional unnamed narrator of *Austerlitz* ends his story in a highly unusual manner: by referring extensively to another, rather recent book. Returning to near Fort Breendonk, he writes:

I took the book Austerlitz had given me on our first meeting in Paris out of my rucksack. It was by Dan Jacobson (a colleague of his, although unknown to him all these years, Austerlitz had said, and it described the author's search for his grandfather Rabbi Yisrael Yehoshua Melamed, known as Heschel. All that had come down from Heshel to his grandson was a pocket calendar, his Russian identity papers, a worn spectacle case . . . and a studio photograph of Heshel in a black coat with a black velour top hat on his head.

Summarizing the book, with keen attention to objects and materiality, Sebald's narrator ends:

On his travels to Lithuania Jacobson finds scarcely any trace of his forebears, only signs everywhere of the annihilation from which Heshel's weak heart had preserved his immediate family when it stopped beating. Of the town of Kaunas, where Heschel had his photograph taken all those years ago, Jacobson tells us that the Russians built a ring of twelve fortresses around it in the late nineteenth century, which then in 1914, despite the elevated positions on which they had been constructed, and for all the great number of their cannon, the thickness of their walls and their labyrinthine corridors, proved entirely useless. **{figure 3. Ninth Fort, Kaunas; photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}**

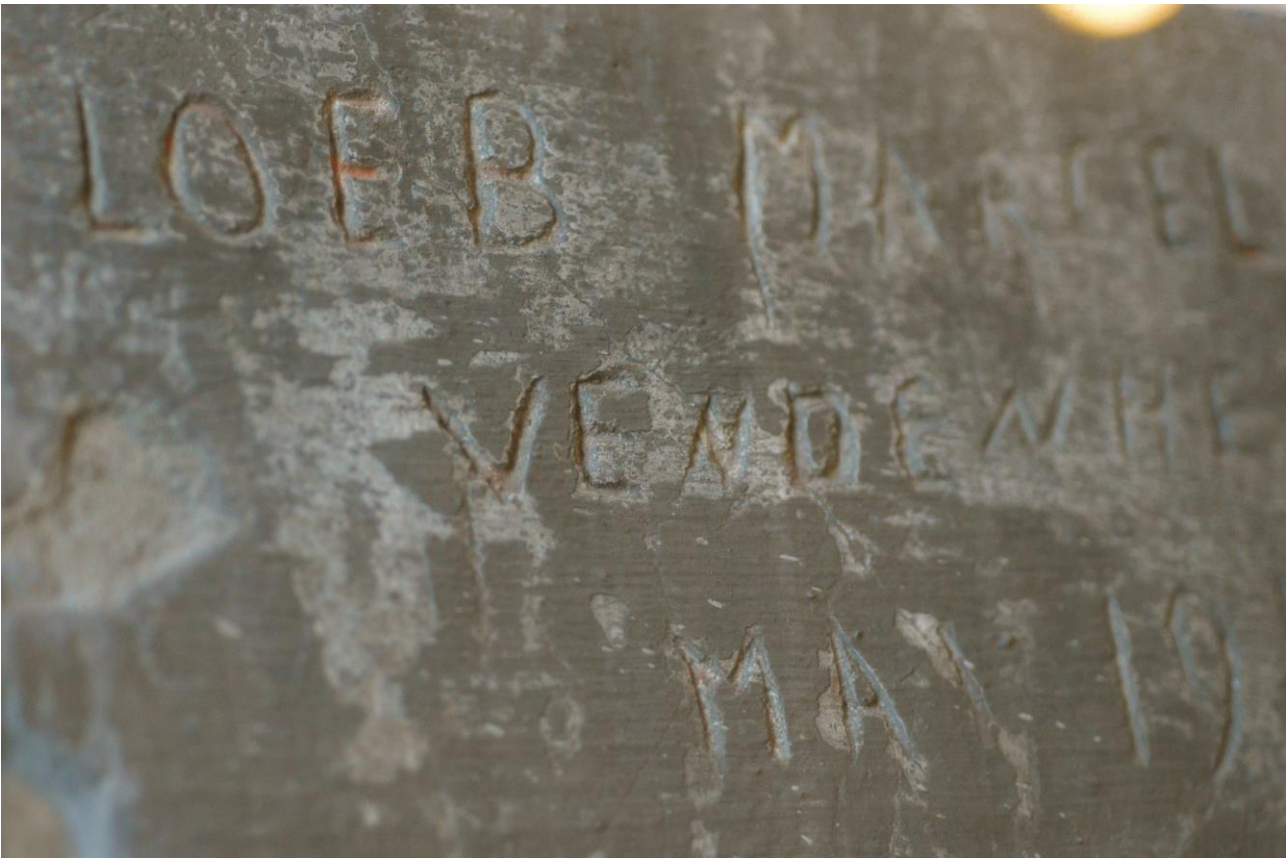


Although I do not know for certain, there is a good chance that the crucial photo of Heshel was taken in a studio owned and run by a branch of my family in Kovno, "Foto-Radio Bazar" I. Jasvoinas, the Jasvoins, at 16 Laisves, the main thoroughfare in the city. For my family who remained in Lithuania, two of the forts were murder sites. Some of the forts, writes Jacobson, were neglected, "others served the Lithuanians and then the Russians once more as prisons. In 1941 they fell into German hands, including the notorious Fort IX where more than thirty thousand people were killed over the next three years. Their remains, says Jacobson, lie under a field of oats a hundred metres outside the walls. (414-15)" Sebald and his narrator did not recall, or were not very affected by the fact that Jewish prisoners had been compelled to burn and rebury the pulverized bodies.

Assuming that he had surmised the fate of Austerlitz's father, the writer's last lines read:

Transports from the west kept coming to Kaunas until May 1944, when the war had long since been lost, as the last messages from those locked in the dungeons of the fortress bear witness. One of them, writes Jacobson, scratched the words *Nous sommes neuf cents Français* ["we are nine hundred French"] on the cold limestone wall of the bunker. Others left only a date and a place of origin with their names: Lob, Marcel, de St. Nazaire; Wechsler, Abram, de Limoges; Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.44. Sitting by the moat of the fortress of Breendonk, I read to the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Heshel's Kingdom*, and then set out on my way back to Mechelen, reaching the town as evening began to fall. (415)

My daughter, now a professional artist and photographer, captured that wall showing "LOEB, MARCEL" in a trip to Lithuania in 2015 **figure 4. Graffiti in the 9th Fort; photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014**



Another work of fiction that has, as a significant component, the Holocaust in Lithuania, is E. L. Doctorow's *City of God* (2000). Doctorow (1931-2015) was a prolific and hugely successful historical novelist, author of *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and *Ragtime* (1975). (At my undergraduate college, Hobart College, Doctorow delivered a memorable commencement address in 1979.) *City of God* did not receive nearly the acclaim of many of his eleven novels—but it should not be ignored. The book interweaves stories of Jewish and Protestant clergy in the late 20th century. It wrestles with issues of religious belief and the meaning of life which is not Doctorow's usual patch. A mildly mythologized vision of the Kovno partisans appears in boyhood memory of Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal's father in *City of God*, who was a "runner" for the Jewish council. He recalled that

If I turned my head to the east, I could see where the terrain roughened into foothills and then mountains with canyons, all of it thickly forested with pine and birch trees. This terrain was magical to me because it was where the Jewish partisans were based who had guns and attacked Germans in military forays. I believed, quite unreasonably, that my parents were with the partisans, were themselves fighting heroes of the Jewish resistance. I believed this at the same time that I believed they were dead. I believed both simultaneously.⁶

Doctorow must have conducted serious research. While fiction, it is historically plausible. The sections of his text that follow, and those situated in wartime comprise some of the most the elegant, ethically complex, and compelling writing imaginable on that terrible time.⁷ It reminds me of one of the few historical 'reconstructions' I value: that of the partisan camp in the Rudnicki Forest. **figure 5. Partisan camp structure, photo by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014**.



I believe that Richard Freund's ardent attraction to Lithuania originated, first and foremost, from the "allure" of the effervescence and perseverance of Jewish sociability and spirituality, centering on the vast, central synagogue complex in Vilna and the famed Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, 1720-1797).⁸ "The Great Synagogue and Shulhoif of Vilna," Richard wrote in *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, "was a mini modern JCC, Vatican City, New York City Library, 92nd Street YMCA [sic], and a mini college campus, all rolled into one."⁹ The Vilna Gaon fostered a current of orthodoxy identified with 'Litvaks' and Lithuania that assumed its contours and dynamism in opposition to the rise and growth of Hasidic sects in Poland.¹⁰ In conversation with David Fishman, Richard appreciated how research into the "Kloyz" of the Vilna Gaon had a tie to the legacy of Jewish resistance through the preservation of Jewish documents and books.¹¹ Richard was profoundly moved, as well, by the efforts of Abraham Sutzkever, partisan poet and memoirist.¹² Richard became deeply interested in the varieties and prevalence of Jewish resistance, which he correctly perceived as having been understudied, undervalued and underestimated.

An often overlooked film

As a complement to Jacobson's memoir, and the novels *Austerlitz* and *City of God*, I wish to make strong plea for colleagues to watch *Partisans of Vilna* (1986) and to consider using it in the classroom or allowing for a special screening. This documentary has accrued barely a fraction of the attention garnered by Claude Lanzmann's monumental *Shoah*.¹³ But *Partisans of Vilna*, in my opinion, is richly deserving of air time and reflection. One of its initial sequences is accompanied by interwar film footage of Vilna's Great Synagogue. Abba Kovner (1918-1987), a principle figure in the film, describes how the synagogue was not narrowly in the business of providing services for Jewish worship and a place for study. It was a gathering point for Jews of different stripes, from anarchists to the most traditionally pious. That moment, similar to Richard's comment on the *Shulhoyf*, is a gem. Kovner became a renowned Hebrew poet and outspoken Israeli intellectual.¹⁴ The current wave of criticism and historiography centered on *Shoah* does not seem to regard *Partisans of Vilna*, directed by Josh Waletzky, as important. It appeared in 1986 and was re-released in 2005.

In certain respects, *Partisans of Vilna* is comparable to, and vastly superior to *Shoah*. The killing grounds of thousands of Jews, Ponar, is not well-treated in *Shoah*, as opposed to *Partisans of Vilna*. Waletzky's film comprises a vast storehouse of visual material for Holocaust Studies. Moreover, on the subject of film technique, Waletzky as an interviewer is almost totally unheard and invisible--giving the surviving partisans pride of place.¹⁵ Waletzky also was more judicious to women, who feature prominently in *Partisans of Vilna*. Certainly, there's too much out there to know all of the related films and books. Perhaps *Partisans of Vilna* has been unfairly buried because of the timing of its premiere, so close to that of *Shoah*. And, in retrospect, Lanzmann succeeded in his desire that *Shoah* be seen as the thinking man's alternative to Steven Spielberg's superficial *Schindler's List* (1993).

Another reason for underscoring *Partisans of Vilna* is the connection to Richard's interest in resistance. Toward the film's beginning we see Abba Kovner testifying before the trial of Adolf Eichmann. In a remarkably succinct formulation, reading from a founding document of what became the united partisans' organization, Kovner revealed the stark, direct relationship between the emergence of the partisans, and their realization that the Jews' treatment at the hands of Nazis was egregiously abnormal—but they did not yet have the terms "genocide" or Holocaust. Kovner clearly repeats the word "Ponar." It was place known to Jews as a picknicking spot not far from Vilna—a pleasant retreat in the country. During the period of the Nazi-Soviet 'Non-aggression pact,' though, the village was used by the Soviets for a very specific purpose. The Soviets dug a number of large, circular pits which were intended to be used as fuel storage. This was in preparation for the war they thought would eventually ensue against Hitler. But Operation Barbarossa caught them by surprise. A number of pits had been dug but they were not yet fully prepared to receive gasoline and diesel fuel. In the Nazi invasion German soldiers apparently discovered them, and they might have been alerted to this type of military-preparedness by Lithuanian collaborators.

The partisans of Vilna, along with those of Kovno, were exceptional among the resistance forces from the ghettos in having engendered groups that cut across political boundaries. This meant that much less of their energy was spent as

Jews fighting against each other, which marked the resistance in many other ghettos, such as Warsaw and Lodz. I keep returning to *Partisans of Vilna* as a teaching tool. There are at least a dozen highly memorable, historically weighty segments of this extraordinary film.

Brief word on a catalogue not to be missed

I also wish to present the work of historian Dennis Klein. Dennis is one of the author/assemblers of the *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto*.¹⁶ Earlier he wrote the most penetrating work about the Jewishness of Sigmund Freud.¹⁷ The "Hidden History" was one of the initial exhibitions and catalogues of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. The exhibition and book, in my opinion, are underappreciated, and there are references to this work that do not name or otherwise recognize Dennis Klein as its editor/author. Although important research, including that of Richard, came after the appearance of this catalogue, it is both a treasure trove and a model for how the life and demise of a Nazi ghetto may be explored.

Digging and digging

Perhaps most famous among his archaeological pursuits, Richard probed the depths of depravity Jews suffered in the pits of Ponar, on the outskirts of Vilna, and the reactions of Holocaust victims to their plight. The kind of tragedy experienced by Jews at the hands of the Einstazgruppen, and elsewhere in Lithuania, has received far less attention than those who were subjected to concentration and extermination camps.¹⁸ Richard's work in Ponar was featured in the *New York Times* and the BBC—a truly remarkable achievement.¹⁹ My own twist on Richard's crucial investigation of Ponar also integrates aspects of the Holocaust in Kovno and provincial regions of the country which Richard deals with in his final books. Alas, had we not been robbed of Richard in the summer of 2022, I likely would have pursued conference forums and a publication with him in order to further enjoin and expand on the Ninth Fort of Kovno and Ponar escape stories.²⁰

Richard wrote me about his Lithuania projects that were in the works in the summer of 2015. He knew that I had brought several student groups there for study tours, I conducted research in Lithuania for my book, *The Crime of My Very Existence*, and returned for recent work on Jews and photography. When I was invited to participate in a conference in Kaunas in 2001, Robin O'Neil, a former police detective who was among the first to pursue forensic analysis at the Belzec extermination camp, prodded me to devote some time to the Ninth Fort. Robin was a PhD student of my colleague John Klier (1944-2007). John was a pioneering historian of Jewry in the Pale of Settlement and the pogroms.²¹ Along with my great fortune of having been with Richard at the small college where I taught for a year, I had extraordinary luck in landing in a department, in London, with John Klier as its head. In London I have enjoyed exceptionally vibrant and humane colleagues for decades.

When Robin O'Neil learned that I was considering visiting Kaunas, he insisted that I write to Chaim Bargman, and that I have Chaim show me what was left of my family's *shtetlach*. On that trip in 2001 I also made my first (of many) visits to Ponar. Most likely repeating part of a message he had prepared for someone else, "Paneriai [Ponar]," Richard wrote me in 2015,

is very crucial. The Einsatzgruppen murdered 100,000 in pits from 41-late 43 In late 1943 the Nazis realized the Russians were coming and wanted to cover up by burning the bodies. They brought concentration camp internees to Paneriai to burn the bodies in early 44 and they tunneled from their "work" stations and escaped. Joined the partisans and thus we know of their efforts. The tunnel entrance is known. 30 meters undiscovered. . . . I am now invited with the Lithuanians to map the pits and the tunnel of the Ponary Massacre pits and the escape tunnel. Could be like the 'Oneg Shabbat' in Warsaw story.²²

In *Digging Through History Again: New Discoveries from Atlantis to the Holocaust* (2022) Richard stated that he also was reacting to a current of antisemitism in Lithuania which cast doubt on, or denied altogether, the reality of the escape at Ponar.²³ I had never heard such a suspicion. But it is likely that this was part of the anti-Jewish polemics in Lithuania, reflected elsewhere in Eastern Europe, that sought to minimize the Holocaust.

I responded (in 2015): "Certainly large parts of the grounds [of Ponar] have indeed been mapped but it is incomplete. It's been known for years that there are more pits than the ones accessible, and at least one of them was not 'original'." That is, a pit exhibited for visitors was not actually used by Nazi killers. I encouraged Richard to speak with the guide with whom I regularly worked, Chaim Bargman. I added that I did not believe that the "Oyneg Shabbos" comparison made much sense, in this case. I was unconvinced that there was anything, in Lithuania, like the systematic effort undertaken in the Warsaw ghetto to preserve the entire history of the experience.²⁴ "I also think," I advised, "that there might be some confusion" in Richard's brief description "between the escape from the 9th Fort and Ponary."²⁵

Richard then clarified: although the fact of the tunnel and the escape was known, what remained unknown was the precise location of the tunnel—because it had collapsed. In my opinion, this was unclear. I did not recall whether the subject was ever addressed. But I agreed, enthusiastically, that more intensive work should be done, if possible, in order to flesh out as much information about this event as possible.

I was to learn, only from reading his books after his death, that Richard was, indeed, concerned with the escape at the 9th Fort as well and how these escapes were related.²⁶ But regarding the 9th Fort I now am aware that we took different sides in a controversy about that dramatic event. Richard accepted the account of Alex Faitelson, and I support the perspective of Chaim Bargman.²⁷ The contention revolves around two issues: who were the main individuals involved,

and exactly when did the escape occur? Richard and I never had the chance to thrash this out. Richard had a significant personal connection to Faitelson, and me, Chaim.

Some years earlier Dan Jacobson also was struck by Chaim's near-reenactment of the escape. He writes in *Heshel's Kingdom*:

One squad assigned to digging up and cremating the dead at Fort IX managed to plan and execute an extraordinarily elaborate break-out. It involved fabricated keys, bars, chains, and steel doors sawn through with stolen files, the excavation of forgotten tunnels and the digging of new ones. Shlomo [Chaim] took us along the route they had followed. Earlier, in one of the cells, we had seen a display of charts and pictures relating to this escape; and a proud, melancholy photo of a post-war reunion of the survivors. Only about ten of the more than sixty men who had made the break-out appear in it. There were no escapees from any of the squads that had preceded them or from the squads that took their place.²⁸ **figures 6 & 7: escape route, photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014**.





Although Ponar is mentioned in *Heshel's Kingdom*, Jacobson does not describe it in his account. The Vilna part of his trip was before he met Chaim as his guide.

What proved to be the most newsworthy result from Richard's work in Ponar was his critical assistance in pinpointing the precise location of the tunnel, which prisoners had dug mainly with spoons. **figure 8: Ponar pit, photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014.**



An incredible, unintended consequence of the slave laborers' exhumation and reduction of earlier victims' remains was their secret excavation of a long escape tunnel. Let me be explicit about a difference of interpretation I had with Richard over the matter—that we were able to discuss only briefly. He believed what was most important about the tunnel was its function, for all time forward, to help to disprove would-be Holocaust deniers. It was material proof of the Holocaust in Lithuania, as well as proof of forceful Jewish resistance. The tunnel is still in the process of being further examined and memorialized, leading to Polar becoming realized as a much more significant site of the Holocaust than it had been accorded previously. In all of my time at Ponar I had never seen more than a handful of visitors at a time, and never more than two buses or vans in the parking lot.

As much as I accepted (and still value) this shaping of Richard's work on resistance, I thought it was crucial, as well, to consider the specific motivation of the prisoner/slave laborers at the time—with regard to their desire to convey highly specific information about the Nazi effort to cover up their crimes. This, to me, is what binds, most closely, the escapes from the Ninth Fort and Ponar. In Richard's *Archaeology of the Holocaust*, one finds the statement: "(Nazi-ordered *Aktion* 1005 created these squads of Jews, brought especially to killing sites to burn the 'evidence' of the killings.)"²⁹ As opposed to being parenthetical, I believe that *Aktion* 1005 is of paramount significance. The prime objective of these escapes was not to simply escape the Nazi clutches. The goal was to enlighten humankind that the Nazis had put a great amount of effort into covering up the highly unusual character of their war against the Jews. In forcing Jews to pulverize bodies that already had been buried and partially destroyed, and making it less likely for anyone to find or identify human remains,

the Nazis were trying to cover up the extent to which their destruction of European Jewry went beyond war-related massacres, as known up to that time. Most of the escapees thought that there was little, if any chance, that they themselves would survive.

Part of the reason for the divergence between my interpretations and those of Richard is because I consider myself both a historian of Nazism, which stems from my origins investigating nationalism, as well being a historian of the Jewish people and the Holocaust. In important respects taking a cue from Christopher Browning, I have sought to explore how the Nazis "improvised" their genocidal activity through not only building camps and walling up areas of cities and towns for ghettos—but in their insidious use of the built environment. I could not agree more strongly with Richard that 'material culture matters'³⁰—a view that has been ignored or resisted in much of Jewish Studies.

Part of the reason why I continued to bring student groups to Lithuania was because of the material culture that was left in the country—in terms of both Jewish history, per se, and the Holocaust. Ponar, I believed, was one of the most appropriate sites imaginable for teaching about the significance of the Soviet-Nazi "non-aggression" pact, and illustrating the Soviet wariness of their deal with the Nazis lasting for more than a few years. Ponar was selected as the site for fuel storage tanks by the USSR not simply to supply their industrial needs—but as preparation for war with Nazi Germany. The tanks were dug into the ground, in a wooded area. That was intentional. The fact that these were camouflaged, in natural surroundings, was useful for the Soviets.

The Nazis found them useful for two reasons. Large holes in the ground were, to Nazi mass murderers, an ideal feature of the landscape for disposing of huge numbers of bodies. Natural cliffs and ravines had been exploited in similar ways, such as in Babi Yar. Although the Nazis were not averse to turning the killing and humiliation of Jews into public spectacles, they were disinclined to provide easy access to hundreds and thousands of bodies. This was especially the case for victims who obviously were not military opponents. From Robin O'Neil's dissertation about Belzec I also was aware that the Nazis were wary of the mass disposal of bodies near livestock. Nazi officials did not want friction with local farmers over having contaminated the water table. To me, then, a significant and large part of the story was the geography, the built environment of the Soviets, and then the different, horrendous use of that built environment by the Nazis.

Another primary reason for the longevity of Holocaust murder scenes in Kovno is because the Nazis used previously built fortresses. "In the late nineteenth century," Dan Jacobson writes in *Heshel's Kingdom*,

the Russians built a series of twelve forts around Kaunas to enable them to defend the city against the German armies which they knew would sooner or later invade the country. In 1914 the Germans duly appeared and the forts promptly surrendered, for all their size and complexity, the thickness of their walls, the size and number of their canon, the depth of their tunnels and underground chambers, the cunning lines of their earthworks and the elevated positions on which they had been built. Subsequently several of them fell into disuse. Others did not.

Between the wars the government of the first Lithuanian republic turned Fort IV, VII, and IX into prisons for its enemies: some criminals, many Communists. When the Russians returned in 1939 they also, predictably enough, used them as prisons: for anti-Communists, members of the local intelligentsia, Zionists, etc. (159)

I have argued that the Nazi's appropriation of such fort-prisons—such as the Ninth Fort and Breendonk, in Belgium--helped to endow them with patina of upholding "law and order."³¹ The Germans, Jacobson continues, "used the forts as headquarters, torture chambers and places of mass slaughter." (159) They also served more prosaic purposes, such as storage facilities. The Ninth Fort "had the most horrific reputation—which is to say only that more innocent people, the overwhelming majority of them Jews, were killed there than at the other sites in and near the city." (159) This photograph is myself and Chaim, one of the many times we have stood in front of a repurposed early 20th century map on the ground floor of the fort. **figure 9. Chaim Bargman and the author, 9th Fort; photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014**



Although the forts were not far from the city's center, they were considered well-enough on the outer fringes for Nazi purposes. A few are still used by the Lithuanian military, and some are now converted into commercial premises, such as for paint-ball games. In the early 2000s they were largely dormant, although parts were used for governmental purposes.

As 1943 wore on, the Nazis could never admit, publicly, that they were losing the war. On the one hand, the unarticulated desperation of National Socialism led to the speeding up of their annihilation of European Jewry. On the other hand, it led them to attempt to destroy evidence of mass murder. Not surprisingly, it was Jewish prisoners who were

forced to do this grotesquely dirty job. Given that the pits of Ponar, along with the Ninth Fort on the outskirts of Kaunas, held the bodies of tens of thousands of Jews, the Nazis assembled teams of Jewish forced laborers to perform this gruesome, duplicitous action. Despite their excruciating work, during the nights a group of men in Ponar dug their tunnel, which they hoped would lead to contact with people who might convey news about this dastardly phase of Ponar. The modest museum at the Ninth Fort reproduces some of the drawings made by the prisoners that they hoped would convey this message through their escape.

The precise location and character of this tunnel at Ponar was one of Richard's outstanding discoveries. In addition, Richard helped to locate a number of death pits which had not been definitively identified. This was not just a minor academic puzzle being solved, or the recovery of a small step in one facet of Nazi genocide.

I had known about the existence of this escape tunnel because I visited Ponar several times since 2000. I regularly took groups of MA students from my Holocaust historiography seminar and had also gone on my own for research. I was oblivious, however, to the fact that we did not know precisely where that important tunnel was. I was, however, aware that there were a number of unmarked burial pits at Ponar. On at least two of my trips had I looked for, and believed I had found two or three pits which were in the undeveloped wooded areas. I did not, though, have any specific plan and did not follow up from these informal investigations.

A primary reason why I stressed the importance of Ponar to my students on study tours and in classes on the Holocaust is because it helps to illustrate some dimensions of the Holocaust that may be obscured or lost by the focus on Auschwitz. In addition to erecting installations from scratch that came to be significant in the Holocaust, the Nazis used the built, and even the natural environments they found, in improvising and expediting genocide of the Jews.

I believe, in contrast to Faitelson, that Chaim has conducted reliable, pioneering research on the group of prisoners from the 9th Fort in Kovno, from the night of the 25th to 26 December 1943. Chaim can describe the event in minute detail, and trace exact steps. Like their counterparts in Ponar, the 9th Fort escapees were motivated in largest measure by their determination for the world to know that the Nazis were attempting, systematically, to obliterate the evidence of the mass murder of the Jews. When Richard and I began discussing his Lithuanian projects in 2015 I was greatly looking forward to bringing Richard and Chaim together and spending time with them in Kovno and the Lithuanian hinterland. I assumed that in the coming years Chaim would be able to suggest a number of sites in which Richard could deploy his sophisticated archaeological tools and techniques, which would lead to a number of new avenues in Holocaust and Jewish historical research.

In addition to the escape from the 9th Fort, I believe that a number of Chaim's themes would have resonated with Richard. Chaim loved to show visitors the Abroiskes stop off the main road from Vilnius to Kaunas—what remained of a well-known Jewish tavern. **{figure 10. Abroiskes tavern, photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}**



He also insisted that his groups see one of the few extant wooden synagogues, which apparently has now been restored, in Ziezmariiai, in the Kovno district. There also was a large, delapidated formerly Jewish-owned tavern in Ziezmariiai.

{figure 11. Ziezmariiai tavern; photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}



That town illustrated, for him, how it was possible to identify Jewish buildings—especially "cut corners" as a deliberate mark of Jewish businesses. I believe that this feature of the Jewish built environment extends to areas of Litvak settlement in the diaspora, as well—including the East End of London. **{figure 12: London's East End, photograph by Michael Berkowitz, undated}**



In a number of places Richard emphasizes that while material culture is important, there is nothing more important than people. Chaim shares that idea. On my first trip to Lithuania Chaim introduced me to Father Stanislaus. Chaim said that he had been crucial in helping Jews to escape by passing along documents and messages. Father Stanislaus declined the process that would have deemed him a "Righteous Gentile" by Yad Vashem because he thought that he had done so little. He said that he did not know with whom he was dealing, and he did not know what he was passing on. He only had the vague sense that it was to help Jews, and against the Nazis. I don't believe that I have ever met a more modest soul. His room was a tiny cell, barely a straw mattress on a tiny bed.

A few times, passing through a small town, Chaim would recognize a "Righteous Gentile" and introduce me—however difficult with the language barrier. There was a woman who occupied special place in his heart who was especially welcoming to him and his groups whom I visited on several occasions, Brone Juriliene. On one of these trips I was fortunate to have my daughter, Rachel, with me. Rachel found Brone a fantastic model and sparkling character. **{Figures 13, 14, and 15: Brone Juriliene; photographs by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}**





Brone explained how she and her family had hidden Jews in their chicken coop. The first of them had been a friend from her earliest school days, who she described as a childhood 'boyfriend.' Although he mainly gained his examples from Poland and the Ukraine, I found Timothy Synder's analysis of what motivated many of the rescuers of Jews was consistent with the experience of Brone.³² Rachel did not have the chance to meet the artist Jacob Bunka (1923-2014), whose work marks the memorial site in Plunge in the west of Lithuania, but she expressed admiration for his memorial installations. **{figure 16: memorial in Plunge carved by Jacob Bunka; photograph by Rachel Berkowitz, 2014}**



I had wanted to take Richard there. And I so wished to also bring Richard together with Natalia Romik, an architect and artist who worked with my colleague Francois Guesnet, and was a recipient of the Dan David Prize in 2022.³³ Natalia has brought attention to, and creatively exhibited spaces which Jews themselves devised as secret, as well as places where they were hidden by non-Jews.

Alas, there are hundreds of projects which Richard would have dived into himself, or urged students and colleagues to take up. Resistance in the Holocaust could certainly have occupied him for three or four more books. I had assumed that there was no urgency in planning for collaboration, and that in the coming years Richard would have reason to spend large stretches of time in Britain. I thought of Richard--but did not immediately follow up--when Dean Irwin, a recent PhD who has written on medieval Anglo-Jewry,³⁴ weighed into the debate about the Holocaust memorial planned for London.³⁵ Dr Irwin speculates that the site selected for the memorial is, in fact, where a group of Jews were massacred in the "Coronation Riot" of September 3, 1189.³⁶ Is there anyone who has the smarts, creativity, fortitude, and courage of Richard, who would be able to confront this intriguing coincidence? Bereft as we are, Richard has left us with nearly uncountable ways of continuing his legacy.

¹ See the special issue of *Jüdische Geschichte & Kultur. Magazin des Dubnow-Instituts*, 6 (2022).

² Richard A. Freund, *Understanding Jewish Ethics*, vols. 1 and 2 (San Francisco: EMTText, 1990-1993).

³ Dan Jacobson, *Heshel's Kingdom* (London: Penguin, 1998), 149-50.

⁴ Amy Simon, "A commentary on Dan Jacobson's Holocaust writings," in *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. 47 (2015): 7-27; Murray Baumgarten, "Dan Jacobson's 'mattering map': Heshel's Kingdom as a split-screen family album," in *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 19, 2 (2021): 349-359.

⁵ Michael Berkowitz, "'A Grey Savior': Kenneth Clark and the rescue of Hamburg's Warburg Institute," in *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, 30 (2021): 240-262.

⁶ E. L. Doctorow, *City of God* (London: Abacus, 2001), 56.

⁷ *City of God*, 54-61, 75-82, 92-7, 117-24

⁸ Richard A. Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust: Vilna, Rhodes, and Escape Tunnels* (Lanham, MD, Boulder, CO, New York, London: Roman & Littlefield, 2019), 380.4/647; 388.1/647.

⁹ Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 380.4/647.

¹⁰ Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews of Lithuania*, trans. Adam Teller (New York: Berghahn, 2001); Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944*, edited and introduced by Benjamin Harshav, trans. Barbara Harshav (New Haven and London: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Yale University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Richard A. Freund, *Digging through History Again* (Lanham, MD, Boulder, CO, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 138-9; Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 451.4/647.

¹² *Digging through History Again*, 138-9; Abraham Sutzkever, *From the Vilna Ghetto to Nuremberg: Memoir and Testimony*, edited and translated by Justin D. Cammy, afterword by Justin D. Cammy and Avraham Noverstern (Montreal & Kingston, London and Chicago: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021);

- ¹³ See Michael Berkowitz, "On Cazenave's *An Archive of the Catastrophe* and McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselberger's *The Construction of Testimony*" in *Jewish Film and New Media*, 8, 2 (2021): 284-292.
- ¹⁴ Abba Kovner appears throughout Cazenave's *An Archive of the Catastrophe*, and only occasionally in *The Construction of Testimony*, which has limited references to Lithuania overall.
- ¹⁵ See Michael Berkowitz, "The Holocaust on Film--*Shoah*," [review of Sue Vice, *Shoah* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)] in *Viewfinder: Moving Image and Sound, Knowledge and Access: Journal of the British Universities Film & Video Council* (April 2012), at <http://bufvc.ac.uk/articles/the-holocaust-on-film-shoah> [accessed 1 August 2020].
- ¹⁶ *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Boston, New York, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997)
- ¹⁷ Dennis B. Klein, *Jewish Origins of the Psychoanalytic Movement* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
- ¹⁸ See Konrad Kwiet, "Rehearsing for Murder: The Beginning of the Final Solution in Lithuania in June 1941," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1998): 3-26; Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Bestatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941-1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011); Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary 1941-1943: A Bystander's Account of a Mass Murder*, ed. Yitzhak Arad (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁹ Nicholas St Fleur, "Escape Tunnel, Dug by Hand, Is Found at Holocaust Massacre Site," in *New York Times*, June 29, 2016, section A, 4; "WW2 escape tunnel uncovered in Lithuania's Ponar forest," 29 June 2016; available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36664806> [accessed 17 March 2023].
- ²⁰ Concerning the escape from the 9th Fort, see Yosef Gar, *Umkum fun der Yidisher Kovno* (Munich: Farband fun Litvishe Yidn in der Amerikaniser Zone in Daytshland, 1948), 37 and Alex Faitelson, *The Truth and Nothing But the Truth: Jewish Resistance in Lithuania* (Jerusalem and New York: Gefen, 2006). Faitelson's account, however, differs in some important respects from that of Chaim Bargman, who Faitelson criticizes in his book, 328-331. See also Dmitri Gelpernus, *The Kovno Ghetto Diary*, trans. Yiddish to Russian by Chaim Bargman, trans. Russian to English by Robin O'Neil (2003); originally M. Yelin and D. Gelpern, *Partisaner fun Kausaner geto* (Mokye: Farlag "Der Emes", 1948). Gelpernus/Gelpern is referred to as Dima (Dmitri) Galperin in *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Police. By anonymous members of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, translated and edited by Samuel Schalkowsky, introduced by

Samuel Kassow, published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 35-6; Freund, *Digging Through History Again*, 129.

²¹ John Klier, *Russia gathers her Jews: the origins of the "Jewish question" in Russia, 1772-1825* (DeKalb, IL:

Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); John D. Klier and Shlomo Labroza, eds., *Pogroms: anti-Jewish violence in*

Russian history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Klier, *Russians, Jews, and pogroms of 1881-*

1882 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²² Richard Freund to the author, 27 July 2015; on background of the pits, see Freund, *Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 559.2/647.

²³ Freund, *Digging Through History Again*, 117.

²⁴ See Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Author to Richard Freund, 27 July 2015.

²⁶ Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 267.3/647, 269.1/647.

²⁷ Freund, *Digging Through History Again*, 133-4.

²⁸ *Heshel's Kingdom*, 167.

²⁹ Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 46.6/647.

³⁰ Freund, *The Archaeology of the Holocaust*, 14.9/647 [e].

³¹ Michael Berkowitz, "The Nazi Equation of Jewish Partisans with 'Bandits' and its Consequences," in *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 13, 2 (June 2006): 311-33.

³² Tim Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as Warning and History* (London: Bodley Head, 2015), 250-271.

³³ See <https://davidprize.org/winners/natalia-romik/> [accessed 30 March 2023].

³⁴ Dean A. Irwin, "The materiality of debt to Jews in England, 1194-1276," in *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 49 (2017): 56-71.

³⁵ Rebecca D. Pollack, "The politics of space and identity in the Hyde Park Memorial Museum," in *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 54 (2022): 1-29.

³⁶ See Cecil Roth, *A Jewish Book of Days* (London: Edward Goldston Ltd., 1931), 210-11.