

Back to Shul

Richard Schofield

Foreword by David G. Roskies

Lithuania's 100 or so surviving former synagogues are among a tiny handful of reminders of the country's once large and diverse Jewish population, magnificent monuments of stone and wood that not unlike the people that once prayed and studied in them today lie neglected, abandoned and forgotten in towns, villages and cities from Alytus to Zarasai. With the help of little more than a cheap Latvian smartphone and a random cast of kind-hearted friends and strangers, in August 2017 the English documentary photographer and long-term resident of Lithuania Richard Schofield set off on a 12-day journey around the country to document these extraordinary—and extraordinarily tragic—buildings in a small act of personal remembrance as the nation approached the 100th anniversary of the re-establishment of its independence. Part road trip, part photographic essay and part love letter to one former synagogue in particular, *Back to Shul* is the singularly unorthodox result of an equally unusual journey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Moving from his native England to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius in June 2001, Richard Schofield was awarded an MA with Distinction on the groundbreaking Photojournalism & Documentary Photography course at the London College of Communication in December 2009 for a two-year project shot throughout Lithuania using nothing more than a ‘technically lamentable’ Nokia E61i mobile phone. In September 2013 Richard moved west to Kaunas to work on a one-off Litvak-related project that culminated in an exhibition at the city’s infamous Ninth Fort and that rapidly developed into an ongoing preoccupation with Lithuanian Jewish history and culture in general. One of four nominees for the 2014 Sugihara Foundation Citizen of Tolerance Award, Richard was the driving force behind the 2014 ‘Pizza Jazz Nazi’ court case in Kaunas and in 2015 he founded the International Centre for Litvak Photography, a small NGO that uses photography as the catalyst for a variety of innovative projects—this book among them—aimed at fostering a better understanding of Litvak heritage and culture both in Lithuania and abroad. At the end of the same year Richard commissioned the Ukrainian composer Anton Dehtiarov to write the preliminary score for *The Kaunas Requiem*, an extended and constantly evolving piece of experimental music designed to last for 75 years whose First Movement took the form of a live performance over six days inside Kaunas’ abandoned former New Šančiai Synagogue in September 2016. An outspoken champion of the underdog and possessing no Jewish or Lithuanian DNA as far as he’s aware of, Richard has been held at gunpoint twice and is the grandson of the acclaimed pilot and author Harry Methuen Schofield.

THE FORMER NEW ŠANČIAI SYNAGOGUE

Kaunas' diminutive New Šančiai Synagogue was built under difficult financial circumstances over a three-year period between 1929 and 1932 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence at the end of the First World War. An exquisite mix of Art Deco understatement and synagogue tradition, the building is protected as an object of significant cultural, historical and architectural importance by the same Lithuanian State that also happens to own it. Converted into the Orwellian-sounding Bakery Number Nine during the post-war Soviet occupation of Lithuania and currently used as a place to store cardboard boxes by a man who rents a sock factory next door, the building has been seriously neglected over the last three decades to the point at which it's now getting dangerously close to becoming little more than a ruin. In a city that was home to over 30,000 Lithuanian Jews before the war and where no place of memory celebrating the immense richness and diversity of their former lives exists, this situation is as incomprehensible as it is unacceptable. With the help of a diverse collection of friends and supporters living all over the world, in September 2016 the International Centre for Litvak Photography raised enough money to rent the building for a month and stage a six-day live musical performance, installation and exhibition inside, an event that attracted visitors from as far away as Poland, Israel and the United States and that proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that the many Lithuanian individuals and institutions who insist that nothing can be done about the building without an initial investment of large amounts of money are talking nonsense. Despite lacking such luxuries as windows and a working toilet, the building is basically fit for purpose and could, during the warmer part of the year at least, provide Kaunas with a much-needed space for all manner of good things to take place inside. It would then only be a matter of time before the necessary funding could be found to begin its careful restoration and bring it back to life again. Tired of trying to get Kaunas' political and cultural elite interested in helping him do something with the building, in the summer of 2017 the English documentary photographer Richard Schofield came up with the idea of embarking on a journey around Lithuania to visit and photograph the country's other surviving former

synagogues with the intention of turning the experience into a book, a love letter to the former New Šančiai Synagogue perhaps, or a witness statement to a crime that was committed before he was born and that may or may not still be taking place today. This is that book.

FOREWORD

David G. Roskies

A pilgrim is not the same as a tourist. To be sure, pilgrims are no less keen than tourists to visit the celebrated sites, but a pilgrim's ultimate purpose is to see that which is visible only to the inner eye, to experience a presence that may or may not reveal itself. A pilgrim sets out on an intentional journey into three-dimensional space. Whether travelling alone or in the company of others, pilgrims also tend to rough it. They do not stay in five-star hotels or carry a Michelin Guide.

The pilgrim whose progress you are about to follow cuts a rather unusual figure. His original plan of spending each of the 12 nights of his road trip through Lithuania sleeping in a tent proved to be 'a spectacularly stupid idea' once he realised that it was impossible to charge a mobile phone in a field. So in the sweltering August heat he found himself carrying an entirely unnecessary tent and a sleeping bag around in his backpack for roughly 2,500km. Beholden to the kindness of strangers and the generosity of a few trusted friends—mostly expats like himself who were reachable by mobile phone—the photographer and travel writer Richard Schofield successfully completed his arduous, at times monotonous and at times momentous journey through Lithuanian space and Jewish time. This is his story as narrated in an almost deadpan manner, accompanied by his unadorned photographic record.

Richard's itinerary is equally unusual, for a more denuded landscape can hardly be imagined. His journey through Lithuania tracks the ruins of a civilisation that was created over the course of centuries by proud and productive Jews known as Litvaks. On good days, in a matter of minutes he can locate their former synagogues, study houses, rabbis' residences, ritual baths, and marketplaces once ringed by Jewish stores and stalls. On bad days, it's hit or miss. On good days, there are local inhabitants happy to show him the way. On bad days, there is a sea of indifference and ignorance. Then there is the detritus of the 47-year-long Soviet occupation, with its collective farms, state-run bakeries, ecologically ruinous factories and so-called houses of culture. Even as the Soviet Union self-destructed, these edifices and institutions were not built to last.

Were that not apocalyptic enough, at every turn Richard sees the tell-tale signs of depopulation. Not only was the Lithuanian landscape ethnically cleansed, of Jews, Poles, Tatars, Karaites and Scots. All able-bodied Lithuanians seem to have voted with their feet and quit the country. Some towns, once bursting with life, Jewish and otherwise, are virtually empty. Thank God for the storks gliding overhead like dinosaurs in Veisiejai, the families of swifts attending to their makeshift nests under the eaves of the platform in Kėdainiai, and the beautiful red brick former synagogue that sports an uninhabited wheel for storks on its roof in Lygumai. At least the sky is still alive.

What then does our pilgrim see in his mind's eye? What are the questions that torment him? What solace does he derive from his ordeal? This is what we, vicarious travellers, are about to discover.

Jerusalem, August 7, 2018

THANK YOU

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All of the mistakes in this book, including any names missing from the above list, are mine and mine alone.

Back to Shul is dedicated to the silent and anonymous rescuers of troubled souls, uncomfortable histories and stranded hitchhikers in every corner of this strange and complicated land—past, present and future.

CONTENTS

PART 1

Prologue

Route 666

Epilogue

PART 2

List of Buildings

Definitions & Peculiarities

Don't Forget to Remember

PART 1

PROLOGUE

I first set eyes on the former New Šančiai Synagogue in the winter of 2013. I immediately fell in love with it, and since that first encounter I've been searching for like-minded individuals and organisations to help me take possession of the building with the goal of bringing it back to life as a world-class centre of memory, culture and education. After years of getting nowhere thanks to a combination of colossal indifference on the part of Kaunas' political and cultural elite and the fact that I'm a documentary photographer and not a property developer, in the summer of 2017 I convinced myself that it would be a good idea to visit and photograph Lithuania's other surviving former synagogues and turn the experience into a book, a book whose title suggests that I might learn something from the experience, something I could subsequently apply to the seemingly impossible task of bringing the former New Šančiai Synagogue back to life. A restless soul travelling through the darker pages of Lithuanian history, I had no grand plans for the journey beyond a simple wish to remember. We are after all nothing without our memories—the good ones and the bad.

In New York they convert empty synagogues into nightclubs and few if any people complain, but this is in a city whose large Jewish population has become increasingly secularised over the last few decades and who have the freedom to stop using these buildings for the purpose they were originally intended should they wish to do so. In Lithuania they convert empty synagogues into all manner of strange things and few if any people complain, but this is in a country whose large Jewish population was all but wiped off the face of the Earth during the Holocaust and whose freedom was taken away from them for eternity by the Nazis and their willing Lithuanian accomplices during three short years between 1941 and 1944. There's a distinct moral difference between the above two examples, and it was this difference that dominated my thoughts more than anything else as I travelled from former synagogue to former synagogue, thoughts that among many other things forced me to ask myself as I stood inside the former Great Synagogue

in Ukmergė on the eighth day of the journey if it's really ok to play basketball inside a building so inextricably linked with the murder of over 200,000 men, women and children.

I left home on August 1, 2017 and returned 12 days and 2,500km or so later with a stack of scribble-filled notebooks and almost 2,000 photographs having visited and taken pictures of 89 former and three still active synagogues in 59 Lithuanian towns, villages and cities whose contemporary uses include churches, funeral parlours, shops, hairdressers, a vehicle service centre in which cars are repaired in-between the building's original *bimah* columns and, in Telšiai, a former *Beit Midrash* that now serves as the office of a Lithuanian Member of Parliament. Several others I visited, among them buildings protected by the Lithuanian State as objects of significant cultural, historical and architectural importance, lay depressingly derelict and dangerously close to ruin. By pure coincidence my departure coincided with the fast day of Tisha B'Av, an event in the Jewish calendar that marks the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem—an irony that wasn't lost on me as I travelled through the empty wilderness of an almost synagogue-free Lithuania. A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. A journey of 2,500km begins just after breakfast at a bus stop in Kaunas near the former Jewish butchers' courtyard on the corner of Muitinės and Naugardo.

ROUTE 666

DAY 1

Tuesday August 1

*Prienai [Pren/פרען] Balbieriškis [Balbireshok/באַלבירישאַק] Alytus [Alite/אַליטע] Daugai [Doyg/דױג]
Merkinė [Mérish/מערעטש]*

Across the Nemunas an early morning mist hangs over Aleksotas. Less than a minute and more than 70 years away stands the former Schwabe Hebrew Gymnasium. A plaque on the wall remembers the poet Leah Goldberg. Another reminds passers by that, unlike Goldberg, most of the children who studied here before the war were murdered during the Nazi occupation of Kaunas between June 1941 and August 1944. A red city bus arrives and I ride to the top of the hill where Abraham Mapu, the author of the world's first Hebrew novel, once sat for inspiration. When he was a boy, Mapu tried to make himself invisible and as I pass the aerodrome where

countless slaves from the Kaunas Ghetto built a military runway whose only purpose it seems to me was to hasten their own destruction I remember that the Holocaust was arguably the greatest disappearing trick of them all. Just south of Garliava I stand by the side of the road, put out my thumb and start travelling backwards in time. Nijolė stops and drives me to Prienai where the plastic carcass of the former *Beit Midrash* wobbles like a gong when I tap it with my finger. I walk through an unlocked door round the back and find several Soviet-era flats. Through another an architects' studio where two middle-aged women tell me there's nothing left to see. I thank them and they wish me luck. I turn right and right again and walk up a long hill to a crossroads in a forest where a quiet couple whose names I never ask take me to Balbieriškis and drop me off outside the former New *Beit Midrash*, today a private guesthouse no longer serving the needs of the Litvaks who once made up more than 70 percent of the village's population. Lace curtains hang in the windows. Dirty asbestos covers the roof. I take a picture of an expensive-looking hot tub in the back garden and leave. Next to a renovated Catholic church in what appears to be the former marketplace a minibus waits to leave for Alytus and an hour or so later I eat *šaltibarščiai* and boiled potatoes on an inexpensive restaurant terrace before heading off in the general direction of the river where I find a team of builders breathing new life into Alytus' only surviving former synagogue. Built in 1911 and used to store salt during the Soviet occupation, the modest yet beautiful red brick building is scheduled to open as a Jewish museum and cultural centre in 2019. A man by the name of Aivaras is in charge. He takes me inside where empty buckets and bags of sand lying on the floor offer promises of good things to come. We re-emerge into the day, I take Aivaras' photograph and wish him luck. I walk to the outskirts of town where nobody stops to give me a lift for over an hour. A minibus arrives and takes me to the former *shtetl* of Daugai, a pretty village nestled round a lake of the same name. I remember that many of the Litvaks who once lived here made their livings from agriculture and fishing, professions not ordinarily associated with Ashkenazi Jews. The former synagogue is abandoned. A wooden door with peeling paint leans against a wall. I let myself in, crunch broken glass underfoot and climb the stairs to discover an empty room showing signs of stolen radiators. A cultural centre during the Soviet occupation, downstairs in what was almost certainly the men's prayer hall I find a dark and deserted stage. I let myself out, photograph a pile of potatoes

sprouting round the back and walk to the main road where soon I'm sitting in a lorry driven by a man by the name of Caak whose family came to Lithuania from Armenia a quarter of a century ago and who with the exception of himself now all live in the UK. I climb down from the cab and a few minutes later a car with Danish number plates stops to pick me up. Irma and Ramūnas are driving from Denmark where they've started a new life together. We talk about Lithuania and the paradox in which everybody loves their homeland but nobody wants to live in it as Irma drives out of her way to Merkinė and we circle the former marketplace a couple of times looking for the former *Kloyz*. Jews were first mentioned in Merkinė in 1539 around the time that the first wooden synagogue was built. Burnt to the ground along with its intricately carved wooden Torah ark a century or so ago, the replacement stone building is the one I'm supposedly standing in front of, although some say it was destroyed during the Holocaust and rebuilt during the 1960s with the help of money from the United States. A fact no-one can dispute is written on a plaque on a wall on the building next door that says that it was here in 1941 that the Jews of Merkinė were kept before being taken away and shot. I've got a headache and think that five buildings are more than enough for one day. I walk to a roundabout, wait for a bus that never arrives and feed pieces of chocolate to a small dog that appears out of nowhere. Thirty minutes or so later a middle-aged Belarusian driving to Grodno in his bare feet stops to give me a lift. We speed through unbroken pine forest with the windows open and soon I'm dropped off close to the crossroads on the outskirts of Druskininkai, a town whose former synagogues have all disappeared and where I've booked a cheap room for the night. A popular destination since Nicholas I of Russia declared it a spa resort in 1837, Druskininkai was the birthplace of the Litvak sculptor Jacques Lipchitz who lived in the town before emigrating to Paris in 1909. Opposite the hotel his parents once owned is a small one-storey house where a museum dedicated to the artist has been closed for over a decade, the life and work of Druskininkai's most famous son being of no particular interest to anyone in town so it seems to me. With nothing else to see and even less to do, I end the day on the terrace of a tourist restaurant surrounded by groups of less eccentric visitors, listening to the nearby musical fountain with a cold drink in my hand, waiting until I'm tired enough to wander back to the hotel.

DAY 2

Wednesday August 2

Veisiejai [Vishéy/״װישײ] Lazdijai [Lazdéy/״לזדזײ] Simnas [Simne/סימנע] Kalvariija [Kalvárye/״קאלװאַרייאַ] Vištytis [Vishtinets/״װישטיטײטײ]

A short walk to the bus station where a moth-eaten Mercedes waits to drive me to Veisiejai. We stop to pick up people along the way, some of them clutching gardening tools and heading to their small country gardens. The driver tells the woman behind me about an abscess he's treating with herbs and a man buys a ticket to a village with what sounds like the Lithuanian word for raspberry in the middle. Storks glide overhead like dinosaurs. In Veisiejai, where the Yiddish-speaking inventor of Esperanto Ludwik Zamenhof worked as a doctor over a century ago, a middle-aged man smelling of samagonas directs me to the wooden former *Beit Midrash* where a sign by the locked entrance says it now functions as a Baptist church. I sit on the steps of a nearby shop, eat a refrigerated sandwich for breakfast and walk to the edge of town in weather that's already tropical to find a lift. Darker than the average Lithuanian, a farmer by the name of Darius stops to pick me up. We head north through empty fields and I ask him how long his family's worked the land. He has no idea. He also doesn't know the identity of his father and tells me everyone in the village agrees a photograph of a visitor from the Caucasus in 1975 is the closest match. I look to see how fast we're going and notice he has the word Daruis tattooed on his left hand. I don't ask. In Lazdijai, where at the end of the 19th century well over 50 percent of the population was Jewish, the town's cultural centre is located inside the reconstructed ruins of both the former synagogue and former *Beit Midrash*. I climb the stairs and talk a young woman by the name of Viktorija who I find sitting on her own in an office. She can't answer my questions because until I walked through the door she knew nothing about the history of the building she works in. She accompanies me downstairs, points me in the direction of the bus station and wishes me luck. I'm trying to get to Simnas and the best I can do is take a bus to Krosna where I stand by the side of the road and put out my thumb as it starts to rain. After a long wait spent mostly under an umbrella a car full of people stops and I squeeze into the back. We drive seven kilometres in good spirits and I get out at the former marketplace where the town's former synagogue sits forlorn and forgotten, a large padlock hanging from the door preventing me or anyone else from getting inside. Jolanta is a self-employed seamstress on her way to Marijampolė. She tells me about her life with a smile on her face and drives me several

kilometres along a road she didn't plan to take to the former marketplace in Kalvarija where nearby I find what's left of the town's former *shulhoyf*. Recent attempts have been made to breathe life back into the ensemble but there doesn't seem to be any desire to get the job completed. The partly surviving walls of former Great Synagogue are about to fall down, the former *Beit Midrash* is partially renovated and the former Talmud Torah School, a large Star of David over the entrance, is as beautiful as it is depressing. I walk to the Via Baltica and throw stones into a field as a steady stream of lorries roars past in the opposite direction. Jonas is in good spirits as he drives me to Vištytis, going several kilometres out of his way and leaving me outside the 19th-century Lutheran church which he mistakes for the former synagogue. I photograph one of several empty houses for sale nearby as I walk towards the centre of the village and wonder where everybody's gone. Not sure where to go I ask a man standing in front of his house where the former synagogue is and he obliges by drawing a map in the dirt with a homemade scythe. It's not the best map in the world and it takes a while to find what's left of the building I'm looking for, a pile of wood and bricks on the edge of a flowering field. I walk past a rusty plough in a hedge to the deserted former marketplace where I find Pranas pouring himself a beer, the proprietor of—and the only customer in—the only bar in town. We sit at an outside table and talk until it's time to catch the last bus to Marijampolė where another cheap hotel's been booked. Pranas tells me everyone he knows or knew has either passed away or now lives somewhere else. Approximately 1,000 people, mostly Jews and a few local communists, were murdered in Vištytis over a period of about three months during the summer of 1941. During a particularly gruesome massacre the killers picked the Jewish children up by their feet and smashed their heads against the trees in a local park. Pranas was seven at the time and remembers it well. It's not difficult to understand why people don't want to live here anymore. I walk to the bus stop. More than enough for today.

DAY 3

Thursday August 3

Marijampolė [Maryámpol/מאַריאַמפּאָל] Čekiškė [Tsáykishok/צײַקישׁאָק] Skaudvilė [Shkudvīl/שקודוויל] Kaltinėnai [Koltnyán/קאַלטעניאַן] Laukuva [Lóykeve/לויקעווע]

A man in a suit smokes a cigarette behind the law courts. He knows nothing about the former *Beit Midrash* or the former Great Synagogue, the drastically altered remains of both I find standing not far away. Nearby, the former Hakhnasat Orhim Synagogue has been renovated and converted into an art gallery. A plaque by the door remembers its original purpose and shapes where pointy windows used to be betray its original use. I want to look inside but it's too early so I hitchhike for a while in the centre of town before giving up and catching a bus to Garliava where the journey began two days ago. Standing at a busy junction where it's more or less impossible for people to stop, I walk in the general direction of civilisation and travel by bus via Kaunas to Čekiškė where I quickly find the abandoned former synagogue and climb a wall of broken bricks to reach a hole a few metres above the ground that used to be a window. Through the gloom I photograph the remains of the 19th-century Baroque Torah ark and remember that the building's owned by the Kaunas Jewish Religious Community. I eat a kebab for lunch in the shade of the Catholic church and prepare to leave for Skaudvilė. Mark and Jelena are friends from Vilnius on their way to a party on the Curonian Spit. Jelena calls and we arrange to meet. I walk for a while and take a rest from the heat by the side of a long and empty stretch of road bordered by wild flowers and abandoned collective farms. My lift arrives, I climb into the back of the car and an hour or so later I have a brief conversation with an old woman working in a vegetable garden next to the town's former *Beit Midrash* where she lives. Nearby, the former rabbi's house also survives, a small Star of David on its gable possibly the last visible clue to Skaudvilė's pre-war Jewish presence. We drive out of town via the empty former marketplace as a car appears out of nowhere and smashes into the side of us. Thankfully nobody's hurt. It starts to rain as Mark and Jelena wait for the police with mixed emotions on their faces. A kind man whose name I never ask and who's travelling in the opposite direction turns round and drives me several kilometres to the bus station at Kryžkalnis where nothing's going to Kaltinėnai for a couple of hours. I walk up the hill, throw stones at a sign on an empty stretch of road for a while and walk back to the station to catch the bus. At the top of a hill I find Kaltinėnai's combined former synagogue and rabbi's house, a building as small and deserted as the village that surrounds it. A dilapidated wooden shed completed five years before 100 or so Jewish men from the village were gassed at Auschwitz, moss clings to its walls like seaweed and I wonder how

long it's going to be before it falls down. An old man milks a cow in a nearby field as a van pulls into the bus stop and gives me a lift. Restoring old buildings for a living and on their way home to Telšiai from the capital, the two friendly men whose names I never ask accept my suggestion to drive home via Laukuva where the former *Beit Midrash* is the next building on the list. Possibly because of his interest in architecture or more likely just because he's got a good heart, the driver accepts the idea with a smile on his face and soon we're asking a woman for directions on the outskirts of town. Set just back from the road we find another wooden building in the early stages of disintegrating and walk round it as the rain starts to fall again. I remember that seven women and one child survived the Holocaust in Laukuva, hidden by kind Lithuanian peasants, and I wonder if they were related to the anonymous driver as we get back in the van and leave for Telšiai where before I know it I'm fast asleep in the cheapest hotel in town.

DAY 4

Friday August 4

Telšiai [Télz/טעלז] Plungė [Plungyán/פּלונגיאָן] Rietavas [Ríteve/ריטעווע] Šilalė [Shilél/שילעל]
Žemaičių Naumiestis [Náyshtot-Távrik/טאַווריק-ניישטאָט] Švėkšna [Shvékshé/שוועקשנע] Klaipėda
[Méml/מעמל]

Telšiai's former yeshiva threatens to fall down as I take its photograph. I walk up the hill that leads from the former marketplace and inspect a plaque on the wall of the former Soldiers' *Beit Midrash*, a sign that to my surprise indicates not the building's original use but the fact that it now houses the office of the Lithuanian MP Valentinas Bukauskas. Nearby, the wooden former Tailors' *Beit Midrash* is a furniture shop, not open for business yet as it's still too early in the morning. On the way to the bus station I walk past the window of an antique dealer's shop and catch a glimpse of a *menorah*, the traditional seven-lamp candelabrum used by Jews all over the world, and wonder how it got there. I take the bus to Plungė and drink a reviving espresso in the former marketplace before setting off to find the three former synagogues on the list, which should be just round the corner. All I can find is a sign saying Sinagogų Gatvė (Synagogue Street), so I walk into a nearby shop where a man by the name of Romualdas takes me to a large car park where the former Great Synagogue, the former *Beit Midrash* and the former *Kloyz* all stood until recently. A talkative man from Klaipėda delivering fresh bread around the region

picks me up and drives me to Rietavas. Married with young children, he gets up at two o'clock in the morning six days a week. The money could be better but he stays. Home is where the heart is. I stand in the centre of the former marketplace imagining the special loaves of *challah* eaten here every Friday before the butchers murdered the bakers and remember that Rietavas claims the distinction of having possessed both Lithuania's first ever power station and telephone. A thriving and relatively modern *shtetl* in its day, Rietavas has since fallen on hard times. I can't find its sole surviving former synagogue and ask for help inside the local Municipality building. Antanas, whose job description I never ask, takes me on a short walking tour before we arrive at the former *Beit Midrash*, until recently a funeral parlour, a cinema during the Soviet occupation and today empty and abandoned. I remember that a few years ago there was talk about breathing new life into the building and turning it into a museum dedicated to the locals who rescued several of the town's Jews during the Holocaust and empathise as Antanas tells me that when it came to actually doing something, the inevitable nothing happened. Walking out of town a stork blocks the pavement. I remember that they're supposed to represent renewal, creativity and prosperity. I wish it luck. In two lifts I make it to Šilalė where the former *Beit Midrash*, today a large shop selling building supplies, is covered in plastic yellow cladding. With no reason to stay longer than necessary I'm soon sitting in the back of a car that smells of cow dung, a friendly farmer at the wheel, his young son sitting by his side with a smile on his face. They drop me off in Pajūris where I throw stones at a metal bathtub in a field across the road until a lorry driven by a man from Telšiai whose name I never ask takes me to Žemaičių Naumiestis where the town's formidable former marketplace lies almost perfectly preserved. The 200-year-old former brick synagogue on the other hand, protected by the Lithuanian State and owned by the regional Municipality, isn't so lucky. Trees and bushes grow inside. Large holes let in sunlight where the roof used to be. Someone's stolen all the floorboards. Next door is the wooden former *Beit Midrash*, a corrugated asbestos roof covering what appear to be the original wooden shingles. One wall is totally collapsed and the rest of the building isn't far behind. I cross a small bridge over a stream and walk back to the main road where a young man with a glint in his eye and an opinion or two to go with it picks me up and drives me to Gardamas. We talk about Lithuania's many problems and he tells me that the government's to blame for everything, a point of view I

find difficult to disagree with. Martynas is a young lawyer from Klaipėda who moved to the countryside with his wife and young children a couple of years ago and who literally goes out of his way to help, driving past his own village and taking me all the way to Švėkšna where I'm once again impressed at the sight of an almost perfectly preserved former marketplace. A handwritten bus timetable tells me I'll be leaving town in a car and it looks like I won't be getting any further than the coast today. I find the former synagogue, built in 1928 and clearly a great beauty in its day, and walk round the back where an old woman on crutches tells me that for €5 she can find a key and let me in. I decline her offer and wish her luck. I remember reading somewhere that on December 11, 1941, three months after Švėkšna was permanently cleansed of its Litvaks, the building was used to sell their former possessions and my mind drifts back to the *menorah* in the antique dealer's window in Telšiai in the morning. I also remember that Švėkšna is among a growing number of places around the country where small groups of kind-hearted Lithuanians organise the so-called *Vardai* (Names) event on or around September 23, Lithuanian Holocaust Memorial Day, during which the names of local Holocaust victims are read out by anyone wishing to participate in a straightforward ceremony in which no politicians make speeches and where the simple act of remembering Lithuania's lost civilisation of Jewish men, women and children is the only thing that matters. An elderly man stops to pick me up. On his advice I get out at a bus stop on the main road that connects the former East Prussian town of Heydekrug—or Šilutė as the Lithuanians call it today—with the coast. A bus arrives and in Klaipėda I visit the first working synagogue of the journey, or rather I don't visit it because the gates are locked and there isn't a soul to be seen anywhere. Located inside what used to be the *Beit Tahara* (Funeral House) on the territory of the city's former Jewish cemetery, the building also houses a kosher kitchen and *mikvah* and is owned by Klaipėda's small Jewish community who I guess will be along shortly to light candles and observe the beginning of the Sabbath together. I walk to the old town and try to forget for a while with a couple of cold drinks, remembering as I try to forget that I'm sitting inside the same restaurant Adolf Hitler famously dined in soon after the Nazis occupied the city in March 1939 a little over two years before the launch of Operation Barbarossa.

DAY 5

Saturday August 5

Salantai [Salánt/סאלנטאי] Alsėdžiai [Alsýád/אלסדזיא] Tirkšliai [Tirkshle/טירקשליע] Šiauliai [Shávl/שאולוי]

Breakfast in the bus station café as rain pours down the windows. Sixty kilometres away in Salantai I stand outside a green Socialist Realist building that turns out to be the town's cultural centre that in turn also turns out to be its only surviving former synagogue. I remember the reformist rabbi and famed Torah scholar Israel Salanter, who set the bar for ethical behaviour higher than any Jewish spiritual leader before him, lived in the town at a time when it was alive with Jewish shops, flax merchants, flour mills, shoemakers, tailors, doctors, pharmacists and much more. There's nothing happening in town today, so I walk to a Soviet war memorial near the former marketplace where a man whose name I never ask picks me up and drives me to the edge of a large lake in the middle of a forest. I throw stones at a tree until a young family from Kaunas drives me to Alsėdžiai where Jews lived for 300 years and where today what seems like the entire population of the village are sitting on chairs in an attempt to break a world record that I never grasp the meaning of. I remember a rabbinic conference once took place here to discuss the need for educational reform and the publication of daily newspapers in Yiddish and Hebrew as a man on a chair holds up a Lithuanian newspaper to show me some photographs of cats for reasons that I also fail to comprehend. Nearby, two Asian students sit on the curb, one with a smile on his face and the other looking as confused as I am by what's going on around us. I set off to find the former synagogue and ask a man standing next to a square wooden building with a pointy roof if he knows where it is. He tells me it doesn't exist, and after a quick search on my phone it turns out that the building we're standing next to is the one I'm looking for. The chair event's suddenly over. People wander up and down the street holding pieces of furniture and my mind returns to the looted Jewish property for sale in the synagogue in Švėkšna in December 1941. One slow and another fast lift later and I'm in the small village of Tirkšliai where the sound of a woman cutting the grass surrounding the 19th-century wooden former synagogue is the only thing to be heard. Protected by the Lithuanian State and owned by the Lithuanian Jewish Community, the building is a sad-looking sight on the outside. I gaze through a hole that shouldn't be there and discover little to celebrate inside either. An elderly woman drives me north in a vehicle smelling of wood smoke and I get out at a roundabout and try to get

a lift to Šiauliai. Two men on their way back from buying engine parts in Mažeikiai stop and drive me to the other side of Akmenė and I remember that almost everyone who's picked me up over the last five days has been working class. A middle-aged couple take me to the station in Naujoji Akmenė where I complete the last journey of the day by bus to Šiauliai. I walk to the other side of town where the former Frenkel's Factory Synagogue, built in 1914 by Chaim Frenkel, the owner of the largest leather processing factory in the Russian Empire at the time, is empty. Now part of a knitting factory and covered in wires and pipes, the city's other former synagogue on the list is barely recognisable as a former place of worship. The building's deserted, a large bin of empty bottles in the equally empty car park that surrounds the building the only sign of life. As evening approaches I sit on the balcony of a pizza restaurant in the city centre and remember the lack of traffic today, and that tomorrow—Sunday—will be even worse. I call my friend Ian, a hybrid car-owning retired English exile living with his Lithuanian partner 100km away in Kėdainiai, and we agree to meet the next day. I feel much better and walk through Šiauliai's empty Saturday night streets to get some rest in yet another no-frills hotel.

DAY 6

Sunday August 6

Žagarė [Záger/זָאגָר] Joniškis [Yánishok/יֵאִנִּישְׁקִי] Linkuva [Línkeve/לִינְקֵוּוּוּ] Pakruojis [Pokróy/פּוֹכְרוֹיִשׁ] Lygumai [Lígum/לִיגֻמַי] Rozalimas [Rozáyile/רֹזָאִילִים] Joniškėlis [Yanishkél/יֵאִנִּישְׁקֵלִישׁ] Pušalotas [Pushalát/פּוּשָׁלוֹט] Pasvalys [Pósvol/פָּאָסְוָל]

It's already hot as the morning bus rolls into Žagarė. I cross the former marketplace where on October 2, 1941 a detachment of SS *Einsatzgruppen* and their Lithuanian accomplices began the slaughter of over 2,000 Jewish men, women and children, a job that was completed later in the day in a nearby park. In a room round the back of the former *Kloyz* I meet and talk to a couple of firemen and their friends drinking tea and get permission to photograph the two fire engines parked inside what used to be the men's prayer hall. Across the street a plaque on a surviving pre-war building remembers where the *mikvah* used to be. Next to the fire station, the former Great *Beit Midrash* is now a sports hall, and, so I later learn, a school for children with special needs. A middle-aged woman with a smile on her face sells flowers and coffins in a shop in the former marketplace but doesn't know where the former *Beit Midrash* is. She phones a friend and

eventually we work out where it is. The former marketplace is huge. Possibly the largest one I've seen in Lithuania. Many of the buildings that surround it have brass plaques fixed to the walls remembering the Jews, Poles, Russians, Lithuanians and others who once lived and worked in them. Many are empty and abandoned. I walk past the Lithuanian artist Edmundas Vaičiulis' lacklustre Pan House and at the end of a dirt track discover that the much altered former *Beit Midrash* has three aerials on the roof, the tell-tale traces of a former collective farm. Piles of firewood are visible through a small window round the back and I remember the Jewish slaves who were forced to dig up and burn the corpses at the Ninth Fort, the notorious mass murder site on the outskirts of Kaunas where on one day alone in October 1941 almost 10,000 Jews, among them over 4,200 children, were murdered and where today people walk their dogs, have family picnics and—if you can believe it—dance. I lean my backpack against a sign pointing the way to Žagarė's Holocaust murder site and stand in the shade of a tree with my thumb out until a man whose name I never ask stops and drives me to Joniškis in a van full of agricultural machinery. We talk about the Litvaks and like most people I meet on the journey he knows little about them. I wonder if this is good or bad and I suspect it's probably neither. He's genuinely interested in what I'm doing and his curiosity is an inspiration. "What *exactly* is a synagogue?" "What *exactly* is a rabbi?" "How and where do they study?" He drops me off and soon I find the former Great *Beit Midrash* (also known as the Red Synagogue) and the former White Synagogue standing side by side. Awarded heritage protection during the Soviet occupation by a regime that often found it difficult to acknowledge the fact that Jews existed as a people let alone a culture, the two buildings now function as a combined cultural centre, and although there's no sign of life inside either today there are at least a few display boards outside remembering their original purpose and the Jews that once made up almost 50 percent of the town's population. I sit and wait for Ian in the former marketplace where they traded horses before the war and where today I'm alone with the exception of two teenage girls staring at their smartphones a couple of benches away. Hungry, I order and eat a kebab. Ian arrives with a smile on his face and we leave. Soon we're in Linkuva where the former *Beit Midrash* resembles a post-apocalyptic farmhouse. High up on a gable is the Hebrew date of its construction, 5650. A heritage protection plaque hangs pointlessly on the wall and several tyres lie in the long grass round the back. Inside there's

nothing left to see. Between the wars almost every shop in town was owned by a Jew. We drive to Pakruojis where the wooden former synagogue is a patchwork of old and new timber having recently been restored. The town's Jews last walked through its doors in 1941 when it was used as a holding point before the inevitable slaughter. Plant and animal motifs reproduced from old photographs adorn the walls and ceiling in an interior that now houses a children's library, a small museum of remembrance and a space for concerts and other public events. We leave for Lygumai where the beautiful and privately-owned red brick former synagogue sports an uninhabited wheel for storks on its roof. Trees grow dangerously close to its foundations. If somebody doesn't do something soon the building won't be standing for much longer. Rozalimas is a deserted village with orange marigolds lining the sides of its otherwise lifeless streets. The wooden former *Beit Midrash* is a cacophony of insect holes and rot, a barn-like structure you'd never guess was once filled with the sound of people praying. Back towards the Catholic church a yellow wooden house stands where the rabbi used to live. A few doors down, and unlike the children who once studied inside it, a building that once housed a Jewish school survives. Opposite the former marketplace in Joniškėlis we find a green wooden building divided into flats that used to be the *Beit Midrash*, a metal roof on top and clothes drying on a washing line in the back garden. I walk through an unlocked door, let myself in and find no clue to its original purpose. I'm more or less half way home by the time we arrive in Pušalotas. A sleepy village of less than 700 residents, its former synagogue, a meat-processing plant during the Soviet period, is as exquisite as it is forgotten, a plaque on the wall providing a potted history of the Jews who once made up almost 70 percent of its population in just 40 words. The former prime minister of Israel Ehud Barak has roots in Pušalotas. Frieda and Reuven Brog, his paternal grandparents, were murdered here by the *baltaraišciai* on a long forgotten day in 1941. The former *shtetl* of Pasvalys, once home to a substantial Karaim (or Karaite) community, is one of the oldest towns in Lithuania and possibly the only settlement in the world featuring a building supplies shop with preserved *bimah* columns inside. In Biržai, the last destination of the day, we drive round in circles looking for a cheap place to stay and are eventually forced to travel 70km south to spend the night in Panevėžys. We're so committed to finding a bed for the night that we forget to visit and photograph Biržai's two surviving former synagogues before we leave. It's been a long day.

DAY 7

Monday August 7

*Panevėžys [Pónevezh/פּאַנעוועזש] Kupiškis [Kúpishok/קופישוק] Vabalninkas [Vabólnik/וואַבאַלניק]
Biržai [Birzh/בירזש] Krekenava [Krákinove/קראַקינאָווע] Ramygala [Ramigóle/רעמיגאַלע] Kėdainiai
[Keydán/קיידיאַן]*

Weak hotel coffee, hard-boiled eggs and a short drive to the former Torah Society Synagogue. A small Jewish community still exists in Panevėžys, among them the World Press Photo-winning photographer and Holocaust survivor Irena Giedraitienė, although it doesn't use the building we've just pulled up in front of. The last of eight known synagogues that existed in Panevėžys before the war, today it lies empty, its broken windows a modern-day *Kristallnacht* and a small plaque on the wall remembering its original use before almost every Litvak in the city was murdered and the Soviets converted it into a jam factory. I remember there used to be a *kenesa* in Panevėžys, the traditional prayer house of the Karaim (or Karaite), an ancient offshoot of Judaism whose houses of worship resemble synagogues but where visitors are required to remove their shoes before going inside as if they were entering a mosque. I wonder where they are today. In Kupiškis, where both the former Great Synagogue and the former Hasidic *Beit Midrash* are under reconstruction, we find a builder manhandling Soviet-era bricks into a skip. I approach him for information and he tells me that the former Great Synagogue will be a library as it was before the work began and that he isn't sure about the other building. So far the renovation's revealed original features including details of paintings that will be incorporated into the new design, a nice gesture that might even inspire someone to put a plaque on the wall outside. I look through a window into a small and empty room at the former Hasidic *Beit Midrash* and see a blocked-up doorframe, a clinical and deserted space in a country that feels increasingly like it's moving in the same direction. Just round the corner from the former marketplace in Vabalninkas are the former Great *Beit Midrash* and the former *Shamashim Kloyz*, today a funeral parlour and sauna respectively. Both are locked and the surrounding streets are completely deserted. I sometimes joke that Lithuania is empty, and as I travel through one desolate landscape after another I start to believe that there may be some truth in what I say. In Biržai I visit and photograph what I think's the former Great Synagogue but that turns out to be an ordinary house, a breathtakingly idiotic mistake that mystifies me to this day. I have better

luck at the former Hasidic Synagogue on Karaimų, where next door I photograph faint traces of Lithuanian and Yiddish writing above the entrance to a building that used to be a Jewish children's home. The former Hasidic Synagogue itself is divided into flats and looks like any other domestic dwelling in town. Ian fills the car with diesel and we head to Krekenava where the village's two surviving former synagogues sit side by side. One retains much of its original beauty and reveals a sports hall when I look through a window. The other, the former Great *Beit Midrash*, is a tastelessly renovated block of flats, a ghastly shade of yellow with a brown plastic roof. Once there was a notable yeshiva in Krekenava and many of the town's Jews worked in the flax industry. Others owned windmills, a fact I'm reminded of by Loreta, the Director of the cultural centre in Ramygala, a building located inside the rebuilt remains of the town's former *Beit Midrash*. We sit on the edge of a stage inside what was almost certainly the men's prayer hall and talk. She disappears through a door and returns with an armful of old black and white photographs, including one of an anonymous Jewish owner of a windmill, another profession not normally associated with Jews, Ashkenazi or otherwise. I go outside, and near a strange-looking theatrical chair I find two plaques hanging on a wall, one reminding passers by of the building's original purpose and the other of the liquidation of the town's Jewish men, women and children in 1941. We finally make it to Kėdainiai and I check into a cheap room in a Scottish-themed hotel in the old town, Kėdainiai once being a renowned centre of tolerance where several centuries ago approximately 50 percent of its population was Scottish. Nearby, the former Great *Kloyz* is yellow and empty, a plaque on the wall commemorating the Vilna Gaon who lived in Kėdainiai when he was a boy and who married a woman from the town. Kėdainiai's two other surviving former synagogues are today an art school and a Multicultural Centre, although it's getting late and there's no sign of life inside either. I decide to come back in the morning and spend the evening enjoying cold drinks on the hotel terrace with Ian and Harry, the latter an Australian citizen with Litvak roots who spends his summers in the town. We talk about everything from DNA tests to marine biology and it's a pleasure to be lifted out of the strangeness of the journey for a while. Exhausted from another weird and busy day and with 17 destinations still to go, I say goodnight and climb the hotel stairs to bed.

DAY 8

Tuesday August 8

*Kėdainiai [Keydán/קיידיאן] Šėta [Shat/טאַש] Jonava [Yáneve/יאַנעווע] Ukmergė [Vilkomír/וויילקאָמיר]
Anykščiai [Aniksht/אַניקשט]*

On Thursday August 28, 1941, a group of over 2,000 Jewish men, women and children from Kėdainiai and the nearby settlements of Šėta and Žeimiai were marched to the hamlet of Daukšiai and shot in small batches by 20 Lithuanian volunteers. The corpses were spread out at the bottom of a pre-dug grave before a group of Soviet prisoners of war covered them with soil and lime—the latter to prevent animals from digging them up—in preparation for the next layer of victims. It was reported at the time that several tractors requisitioned for the slaughter ran their engines at full power to cover the noise of the gunfire and the screaming. Every year on the anniversary of the massacre a tiny group of people gather beside the mass grave to light candles and place stones on the small Holocaust memorial, a simple act of remembrance organised by Rimantas Žirgulis, the Director of the Kėdainiai Regional Museum and the driving force behind the town's Multicultural Centre which is housed inside Kėdainiai's former Great *Beit Midrash*, the first building on the list today. It's still dark when I get up. I photograph the Moon shining above the old town and start the daily ritual of backing up copies of the photographs I made the day before, doing some general planning for the day ahead, taking a shower, writing and answering a few emails and making sure I've packed everything before I leave. Later than planned I eventually walk across one of the town's two surviving former marketplaces and climb up the stairs inside the Multicultural Centre to what used to be the women's section and that now houses a small museum containing among other things the names of many of the town's murdered Jews written high up on the walls, a list painstakingly collected and double-checked by Rimantas himself. I take a photograph of the surviving *bimah* columns and a grand piano in the former men's prayer hall below where regular concerts, festivals and community events take place, silently salute Rimantas for his heart-warming work and leave to continue the journey on my own again. I pay a quick visit next door to the former Great Synagogue whose doors are still locked and receive a text message from Harry wishing me luck as I walk out of the old town and head towards the bus station. There's hardly a cloud in the sky as families of swifts attend to their makeshift nests under the eaves of the station platform, my departure point for the 30km journey east to Šėta where the former *Beit Midrash*, awarded heritage protection soon after I

visit, is empty, discarded beer bottles on the floor the only thing visible through the building's broken windows. I spend two hours on the edge of town trying to get a lift to Jonava, throwing stones at nothing in particular and watching a horse rolling on its back in a nearby field. Naked from the waist up, a middle-aged man wheelbarrows firewood into a shed and I remember that winter's never far away in Lithuania. A combine harvester gathers crops and an old man walks out of the village to watch the show. A bus finally arrives and takes me to Jonava, the former *shtetl* where over 80 percent of the population was Jewish a century or so ago. The former Peddlers' *Kloyz* is now a food shop, although it does at least have a plaque on the wall remembering its original function. The former Great *Beit Midrash* on the other hand is a large and empty former factory with no clue to its original use. Earmarked by the Soviets for industrial development during the late 1940s, Jonava bears little resemblance to its pre-war self, although walking back to the bus station I do find one street almost perfectly preserved. I take a bus to Ukmergė and walk through the main entrance at the former Great Synagogue where today people play basketball in a space designed for prayer. I stand under a hoop, contemplate the moral complexities of the situation and wonder what the kids who come here to practice every day think. I leave and walk along the side of a stream to the former Korah *Kloyz*, easily mistaken for an electrical substation today, and go round the back to listen to a faint hum escaping through a locked door. In a sweltering afternoon heat I take a city bus to the station where a cup of coffee from a machine tastes worse than I thought it would but gives me the energy I need to visit one more town before I finish for the day. Sixty minutes north in Anykščiai I find another plastic-clad renovation that used to be a synagogue and where a branch of the local Social Services is now based. Surrounded by blocks of flats in the middle of a car park, the other building on the list, the privately-owned former Shoemakers' *Kloyz*, lies empty and abandoned. With similar feelings of desolation and gloom I eat a supermarket sandwich on a park bench under a tree, have a couple of cold drinks in a restaurant overlooking the former marketplace and turn in early in anticipation of more of the same tomorrow.

DAY 9

Wednesday August 9

Troškūnai [Trashkún/טראַשקון] Raguva [Rógeve/ראַגעווע] Širvintos [Shírvint/שירװינט] Kurkliai [Kúrkle/קירקלע] Utena [Utyán/אױטאַן]

Cold instant coffee for breakfast in my room. Outside, a large display board remembers the history of the town without mentioning a single Jew. In 1931 approximately 90 percent of businesses in Anykščiai were Jewish, with Litvaks making up almost 50 percent of the town's population. Jews first settled here in the 16th century and are recorded in great detail in numerous documents available to anyone with an internet connection and a modicum of curiosity as being manufacturers of slippers and stockings, as shoemakers, as butchers, as bakers, as brewers and as much more besides. During the interwar period the town's Jews were involved in local politics, ran a drama club, owned both a Hebrew and a Yiddish library, operated a bank and educated their children at Hebrew- and Yiddish-speaking schools. What is it that compels today's Lithuanian State to do such an impressively good job at forgetting such a large and important part of its own rich and vibrant history? It's a spectacular achievement. A talent that could be used for much better things I'm sure. I push the question to the back of my mind and climb into a lorry for the 20km journey west to Troškūnai where an empty pushchair sits in the garden of a yellow wooden house that was once a synagogue. Miraculously its pre-war alder shingles survive on the roof, although everything else about the history of the building and the large Jewish presence that once surrounded it has long since disappeared. A large man with boxing gloves swinging from his rear-view mirror drives me to a junction in the middle of nowhere. I throw stones at a sign across the road until a young man on the way back from driving his girlfriend home stops and takes me to a busy furniture factory in Raguva where a small plaque on the wall remembers that the building used to be a Jewish house of prayer. I climb the stairs and find an office where a man by the name of Domas looks up from his computer and gives me permission to take photographs inside. Downstairs I go into the former men's prayer hall and take pictures of workers with noise protectors on their ears pushing pallet trolleys and cutting large sheets of wood on noisy machines, the illuminated arches of the windows the only clue that people used to talk to God in here. On the way to find a bus to get me out of town I pass a war memorial in the former marketplace honouring the men of the village who sacrificed their lives during the Lithuanian Wars of Independence a century or so ago. Among the names, Leiba Išeras. After a short bus ride through pancake-flat fields filled with

circular bales of hay I get a lift in a lorry with Dainius who takes me to Širvintos where I find a team of builders renovating the town's only surviving former synagogue. A furniture shop a decade ago, no-one I ask knows the building's future function. "Darbas yra darbas" (work is work) one of them says. Two men wearing baseball caps carry a plank across the room and I remember the Jewish funeral tradition of carrying the deceased to his or her final resting place on a simple wooden board. I also remember that several of Širvintos' Jews, including children and old women, were burnt alive during the summer of 1941 as a man on his way to collect his daughter in Kernavė stops opposite the petrol station I'm standing in front of and drives me to the motorway. Soon I'm travelling north with Andrius, on his way to Anykščiai from Vilnius to visit his elderly mother. We tell jokes to pass the time and 40 minutes later I'm standing opposite the Soviet war memorial in the small village of Kurkliai. Nearby, a sign says Kurklių Sinagoga (Kurkliai Synagogue) and I want to write to the person responsible to thank them for their thoughtfulness whilst reminding them that it's a former synagogue that hasn't seen a rabbi or a minyan for almost 80 years. The small wooden building sits next to a stream at the end of a dirt track. Round the back I find huge padlocked doors, the revelatory scars of collective farming cut to regulation tractor size. Its pointy windows are boarded up with rough planks of wood, and although the building's in a bad shape it's not difficult to imagine how beautiful it once was. Nearby, three girls play and enjoy the peace of the Lithuanian countryside, oblivious to the magnificent wooden monument round the corner. I wash the heat off my face in the stream and walk up the hill to find a bus. Forty kilometres east in Utena, a town that boasted at least two Jewish mayors between the wars, I find the former *Kloyz*, a one-storey building like all the others around it that's now a notary's office. Six boys approach. They ask me what I'm doing and I reply by taking a photograph of them standing in front of it. A few metres away, the 19th-century former Great Synagogue is covered in scaffolding and undergoing yet another profit-driven transformation with more floors being added to an already unrecognisable building. Enough for one day. At this rate I should be home at the weekend.

DAY 10

Thursday August 10

Alanta [Avánte/מטאנטא] Zarasai [Nay-Aleksánder/ני-אלעקסאנדער]

Nothing stirs in the village of Alanta as I arrive in a taxi. I search for the wooden former synagogue as a dog on a chain breaks the silence and the building comes into view. Round the back a wheelbarrow. Through a hole in the wall a solitary bicycle. The two towers of the well-maintained Catholic church catch my eye as I leave. I travel back to Utena, wake myself up with a takeaway espresso and catch a bus to Zarasai in the far northeastern corner of the country. Just over the border in Latvia is the Russian-speaking town of Daugavpils where the Litvak painter Mark Rothko was born at a time when over 50 percent of its population was Jewish. I remember the rich and varied roll call of people the Litvaks have gifted the world and start making a list of their names. Roman Abramovich. Marc Chagall. Leonard Cohen. Sacha Baron Cohen. Aaron Copland. Bob Dylan. Brian Epstein. Harrison Ford. Romain Gary. Philip Glass. Emma Goldman. Nadine Gordimer. Esther Hautzig. Jascha Heifetz. Al Jolson. Emmanuel Levinas. Walter Matthau. Amos Oz. JD Salinger. David Suchet. Helen Suzman. Close to the centre of Zarasai I find a woman cleaning her windows at the former Great *Beit Midrash*. I let myself in through the front door but there's nothing left to see. At the wooden former *Beit Midrash*, easily mistaken for the ordinary house it is today, two plastic watering cans stand by a door. My Jewish tour of a town whose Litvaks once made up more than 50 percent of the population over almost before it began, I walk south out of town to a quiet spot near a lake and try to get a lift to Nemenčinė. A blonde woman in her 50s walks past with an inflated lilo under her arm. She disappears out of view and a few minutes later drifts out of the reeds on the edge of the lake like a latter-day Moses. A police car stops and I'm asked for my ID. I remember Ian calling them 'the filth', a typically English epithet. In Lithuania they call them *agurkai*—cucumbers. A man in a green uniform hands me my passport back through an open window and drives away. Nobody's going to Nemenčinė so I put it on the list for tomorrow and walk back through the heat to the bus station. Three hours later I sit on the corner of Pylimo and Basanavičiaus in the former Jerusalem of the North waiting for the walking Jewish encyclopedia and museum curator Milda Jakulytė to finish work. She arrives carrying a basket of berries and we go and have something to eat in a nearby Belgian waffle bar with her daughter Emma and talk about what we're going to do tomorrow.

DAY 11

Friday August 11

Vilnius [Vilne/ווילנע] Nemenčinė [Nementshín/נעמענטשין] Žasliai [Zósle/ע'לסלע]

I wake on Milda's sofa in the Soviet-era sleeping district of Lazdynai. Less than a minute and more than 40 years away stands the Vilniaus Lazdynų Vidurinė Mokykla, a secondary school whose boundary walls were constructed in 1971 using gravestones stolen from one of the city's former Jewish cemeteries and where today Hebrew letters are visible on several broken fragments. Nearby, a recently placed plaque in three languages reads 'By committing a crime against humanity, tombstones from the old Jewish cemetery laid in this supporting wall were used as a building material. This is an example of the barbaric policy pursued by the Soviet authorities.' The sign was commissioned with the blessing of the city's Liberal mayor and I wonder if it ever crossed his or anyone else responsible for its creation's mind that leaving the stones where they are could also be interpreted as a crime against humanity. After two strong cups of coffee and a ride into town on a city bus I spend the morning visiting buildings with Milda. It's her friend Judita's birthday and she can't help looking in shop windows for a present as we slowly and methodically tick off the buildings on the list. Flats, offices and buildings with unknown uses. The hidden remains of the former *mikvah* at the former Great Synagogue under the dirt near a Soviet-era kindergarten. Two builders taking a rest on the front steps of the Taharat Ha-Kodesh Choral Synagogue, the sole remaining active Jewish house of worship in the city. With mischief written on her face, Milda fiddles with a keypad on a locked gate and we break into the courtyard of the former Epstein's *Kloyz* where we're met by a man shouting at us in Lithuanian, a language rarely heard or spoken in the city 100 years ago when even the Lithuanians called it Vilna. Down the hill from the bus and train stations the former Zavl's *Kloyz* is currently under reconstruction, empty since people stopped living in it at the end of the Soviet occupation. It's the last building on the list. Milda leaves for work and I walk up the hill to the bus station and travel north to Nemenčinė. A street sign breaks an idiotic law by being in both Lithuanian and Polish—the latter culture making up more than 50 percent of the town's population—as a Municipality worker in a high-visibility jacket carries armfuls of gardening tools into the former synagogue, today an unrecognisable and hideous concrete box. A plaque on the wall literally translates as 'From this place where before was a synagogue, on September 20, 1941, about 500 Nemenčinė and other Jews were taken and shot.' Round the back I find a broken

drainpipe that slowly washes away the Soviet-era exterior to reveal the original bricks underneath every time it rains. Nearby, it's possible to make out the faint outline of what was once an arched window. Back in Vilnius I take a slow train to Žasliai and have a brief conversation with a woman as we're getting off, discovering that the town's two former synagogues are three kilometres away and that there's no public transport. Everybody knows their neighbours in the Lithuanian countryside and soon a place is found for me on the back seat of a car driven by a young woman by the name of Giedrė who's at the station to pick somebody up. She knows where the former Hasidic Synagogue is and a few minutes later we're looking through a window at its empty interior. Directly across the street, Žasliai's cultural centre is housed inside the former Great *Beit Midrash*. I remember the pianist and composer Leopold Godowsky was born in Žasliai and find a plaque dedicated in his honour hanging by the entrance. I Google him and am interested to discover that as well as being the principal violinist in both the Los Angeles and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, Godowsky's son, Leopold Jr., also found time to co-invent Kodachrome colour reversal film in 1935. Barely 600 people live in Žasliai today. By the end of September 1941 the town's Jews lay full of bullet holes in unmarked graves in the neighbouring towns of Kaišiadorys and Semeliškės. With the help of several local farmers, three women and two children survived and I wonder what happened to them. Giedrė drives me back to the station and I travel to Lazdynai by train and trolleybus on what's almost certainly the penultimate day of the journey.

DAY 12

Saturday August 12

Eišiškės [Éysishok/איִישִׁשׁוֹק] Žiezmariai [Zézmér/זעזמער] Kaunas [Kóvne/קאָוונע]

A hot dog on the platform as I wait for the train to Varėna where in September 1941 over 800 Litvaks were murdered by a group of Lithuanian volunteers who helped themselves to their victims' possessions after the slaughter was complete. Purged of its Polish population by Stalin in 1946, today's Varėna is a culturally homogeneous town of mostly Lithuanians, famous for its annual mushroom festival and little else as far as I can tell. Several months after returning home I discover that the town has a surviving former synagogue, although the only reason for visiting today is to catch a bus down a long and dusty road to Eišiškės in the far southeastern corner of

the country where according to Litvak folklore the former Jewish cemetery once contained gravestones dating back at least 1,000 years. As in Nemenčinė the day before the street signs are in Polish and Lithuanian, the Poles having made up the majority of the region's population for centuries. To reinforce the point, large photographs of the late Pope John Paul II hang from several buildings as I walk to find what I'm looking for. Next to the public library in what's almost certainly the former *shulhojf* stand the remains of Eišiškės' former Great Synagogue, today a privately-owned ruin with trees growing on the roof and graffiti covering its surviving walls. I walk to the deserted former marketplace and buy some cooked chicken. As I eat it I receive an SMS welcoming me to Belarus. It's that kind of place. I'd originally planned to spend each night of the journey sleeping in a tent, a spectacularly stupid idea I abandoned on the first day when I realised that it's impossible to charge a mobile phone in a field. Thus for the last 2,500km or so I've been carrying an entirely unnecessary tent and sleeping bag around in my backpack. As I'm leaving town I walk into a small group of trees to answer a call of nature and my left foot finds a hole in the undergrowth causing the backpack to spin and throw me to the ground. I get up unhurt and remember the car crash and Tisha B'Av and all the known and unknown men, women and children whose vanished civilisation I've been travelling through for the last 12 days and hope the journey's been worth it as I re-emerge from the thicket and start hitching a lift back to the capital. After 10 minutes I'm on the way to Vilnius thanks to a stallholder whose name I never ask who sells Chinese consumer goods to the locals of Eišiškės every fortnight, although never in the former marketplace. I'm dropped off in the Soviet sleeping district of Karoliniškės in the western suburbs of the capital from where I take a city bus to the station and a long-distance bus west along the Vilnius-Klaipėda motorway to Žiežmariai. It's a long walk down a steep hill to reach the former marketplace where it takes another minute or two to find the wooden former synagogue. The building's under reconstruction but it's a Saturday and nobody's working inside. I find a gap in the wall, fire off a few fuzzy shots and remember it's costing around €80,000 to renovate the exterior of the building and that the interior will remain more or less as it was before and that it won't open to the public for the time being at least. Although it doesn't sound like much to some, €80,000 can sustain the average Lithuanian for a decade and it's not hard to understand how people might consider the

restoration of a former synagogue that's going to remain empty a complete waste of money. Dripping in sweat as I've been for most of the journey I take a bus to Kaišiadorys and climb aboard an air-conditioned double-decker train to Kaunas, writing down the most logical visiting order of the last eight buildings on the list. The air's electric as I take a picture of the former Nahalat Israel *Kloyz*, listen to the sound of the approaching thunder and look forward to sleeping in my own bed for the first time in almost two weeks. I catch a trolleybus close to the flat where the Vilnius-born musician and childcare worker Aniushka Varšavskienė lived with her husband and two daughters before they were herded into the Kaunas Ghetto and murdered, getting off near the empty patch of land where Iser Šliomovičius' childhood home once stood, destroyed by the Luftwaffe during the first days of the Nazi occupation as the four-year-old sat on a train with his mother and two siblings, four Litvaks among thousands of other Jewish victims banished to the east during Stalin's June 1941 Soviet deportations. In prematurely fading light I photograph the 19th-century former Hasidic *Kloyz*, empty and abandoned since the sculpture students from the Vilnius Art Academy moved somewhere else. The former Butchers' Synagogue, another Vilnius Art Academy building, hides in a courtyard in the old town, its conspicuous arched windows an easy clue to its original purpose. The renovated and privately-owned former Neviazher*Kloyz* sits on a street named after Ludwik Zamenhof and is available for rent for conferences, parties and other social gatherings. A blonde wig rests on a plastic dummy's head in the window of the hairdressers inside the former New *Beit Midrash*. I photograph the Star of David over the entrance to the Ohel Yaakov Choral Synagogue, Kaunas' last remaining active Jewish house of worship and take another trolleybus up the hill as the sky grows even darker and the thunder's almost overhead. I stand round the back of the former synagogue in Žaliakalnis, a building now partially rented to a local photographer who organises corporate events and fashion shoots inside. I walk round the front and gaze at my reflection in one of its arched windows as Boris appears on a bicycle with a smile on his face. An orphan who grew up in children's homes, Boris has been living in part of the building for years and keeps an eye on it in return for the comforting security of a permanent roof over his head, his heart-warming story is a typically Jewish arrangement and the only bona fide *mitzvah* I encounter during the entire journey. I remember the accident in the trees in Eišiškės and decide that the journey's definitely

been worth it. I shake Boris' hand and we wish each other luck. The rain spits gently and Kaunas is draped in a temporary darkness as the impending storm fails to arrive. I take another trolleybus back down the hill to visit the final building on the list, remembering as the Nemunas comes into view that not a single former synagogue in the city, including any of the five owned by the Kaunas Jewish Religious Community, has a plaque on the wall reminding passers by of its original use.

EPILOGUE

I last set eyes on the former New Šančiai Synagogue in August 2017 as my short and unusual journey of personal remembrance was finally at its end. I stood in front of the building and asked a passing woman whose name I never asked to commemorate my return by taking my photograph, an image that remains forever blurred in which I stand without a smile on my face in front of the wall that once contained the Torah ark and that's now a heart-breaking mess of bricked-up windows concealing a shabby Art Deco interior in which a man who makes a living from the manufacture of socks stores cardboard boxes. In a few days time a South African rabbi of Litvak descent by the name of Michael Pertz tells me in response to a question I ask him about synagogues that in Judaism it's the community and not the building that's sacred, and although it's comforting to hear him say it I'm still filled with sorrow every time I remember just how easy Kaunas' political and cultural elite find it to do absolutely nothing as an exquisitely beautiful and unquestionably important part of their city's interwar history falls down.

There's a scene in Louis Malle's excellent 1981 film *My Dinner with Andre* that not only describes how the journey left me feeling but that in some strange way also echoes the experiences that led to the creation of this book. Set over a single evening in a classy New York restaurant in which two people do nothing more than eat dinner together and talk, the first part of the film slowly builds as the experimental theatre director of the film's title recounts a series of increasingly bizarre stories to his old friend Wally on the subject of his most recent work-related adventures. Suffering from the occasional hallucination and having not long ago participated in a macabre ceremony in which he was blindfolded and buried alive in a forest in the middle of the night by

his friends, Andre convinces himself that it would be a good idea to visit the Sahara to work on a stage adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. He travels to the desert with a Tibetan Buddhist monk called Kozan where they find themselves standing in the middle of the vast emptiness. Faced with the complete absurdity of their situation, the pair drop to their knees and start eating sand. I cast my mind back to the bags of sand on the floor of the former synagogue in Alytus on the first day of the journey and remember that I have two choices. I can either carry on putting sand in my mouth or I can do something more useful with it—sand being a much better building material than it is a metaphor at the end of a book.

It took just over a year to finish this book. How long it's going to take before there's any good news about the former New Šančiai Synagogue is anyone's guess. If I've learnt anything from the journey it's that I can't do it on my own anymore. These days I'm happy just keeping an eye on the building and making sure that it doesn't come to any further harm. In April 2018 I made an official complaint to the Cultural Heritage Department in Kaunas about the large hole in the roof and the rainwater destroying the original 1930s brickwork, an entirely unacceptable situation for a building supposedly protected as an object of significant cultural, historical and architectural importance in a city currently making preparations to become the European Capital of Culture in 2022. Four months on and the repair work the Lithuanian State that owns the building promised to do still hasn't been completed, the delay being because Lithuanian law demands that the job is put out to tender and awarded to the lowest bidder. You couldn't make it up if you tried. As to whether it's really ok to play basketball inside a building so inextricably linked with the murder of over 200,000 men, women and children, I'll leave that up to you to decide. I'm too busy thinking about cardboard boxes.

PART 2

LIST OF BUILDINGS

Including the two former yeshivas that currently lie empty in Kaunas and Telšiai and a further three former Jewish houses of worship in Lithuania that are little more than ruins, I calculate the total number of synagogues and former synagogues known to still exist in the country in one form or another to be 109. Of these, I managed to visit and photograph 92, missing one in Biržai because nobody's perfect and the rest because they weren't included in the book I was using for reference. Among the 92, three still function as active synagogues, four are now places of memory and education and a further four are planned to open as similar cultural spaces in the near future, one of these being the former Great *Kloyz* in Kėdainiai which was empty when I visited it in August 2017. A total of 34 former synagogues, 20 of which the Lithuanian State supposedly protect as objects of significant cultural, historical and architectural importance, lie empty, abandoned, forgotten, falling down or more or less completely destroyed. At least four former synagogues in Lithuania are currently available for sale.

Quoted construction dates make no reference to later renovations and/or additions and can sometimes be misleading. By far the most interesting column is the one marked 'Use or condition', which some readers may find disturbing, especially when combined with the adjacent 'Protected' and 'Owner' columns. Since returning from the journey, I've unearthed the existence of a further 11 former synagogues in Butrimonys [Bútremanys/בוטרימאָנץ], Jurbakas [Yúrburg/יורבורג], Kaunas, Kavarskas [Kovársk/קאַוואַרסק], Onuškis [Hanúshishok/האַנושישוק], Šiauliai, Ukmergė (where I missed two), Varėna [Arán/אַראַן], Žagarė and Želva [Podzélve/פּאָדזעלװע]. New discoveries keep coming to light, and it's doubtful whether a complete list will ever exist. All of the names of the synagogues and former synagogues used in this book were taken from the *Synagogues in Lithuania* book.

The List of Buildings PDF file can be downloaded for free at

www.litvakphoto.org/back-to-shul

DEFINITIONS & PECULIARITIES

If there's one thing my Jewish friends can all agree on it's that they can seldom—if ever—agree about anything. The following four definitions have been written with this in mind, and it should be stressed that the descriptions are my own and have been included more to help the uninitiated rather than to provide precise definitions for people who already have their own. Much in the same strictly personal way, the spellings of the words transliterated from the Hebrew to the Latin alphabet that appear in this book were chosen for the simple reason that I liked them. Whilst *mikvah* and *mikveh* are both correct for example, I much prefer the former spelling. The Latin and Hebrew renditions of the Yiddish place names used in the Route 666 and List of Buildings chapters are far from complete, but should be more than enough for anyone with even a basic understanding of the place names included in this book to work out which towns and villages they represent.

Shul

From an Old High German word meaning school, *shul* is the Yiddish word for synagogue. Commonly believed to be a house of worship, a synagogue often functions as not only a place of religious observance but also of education and community, a fact that goes a long way towards explaining why so many former synagogues I visited during the journey were known as *Beit Midrash*, a Hebrew term that literally translates as House of Learning and that generally means a synagogue for both praying and studying the Torah in. Although many pre-war synagogues in Lithuania were impressively large and ornate structures, others were unassuming to the point of being little more than a room inside a house set aside for prayer. Vilnius famously boasted over 100 synagogues before the war for example, the vast majority of them on closer inspection falling under the latter category and not being purpose-built buildings at all. The word *shulhoyf* which appears several times in this book can best be described as a synagogue courtyard, a place where several buildings serving the needs of the local Jewish community were all located together.

Litvak

A Litvak is a Lithuanian Jew. The word almost certainly originates from the old Polish vernacular *litwak*, meaning a person from Lithuania. To a traditional, Yiddish-speaking Litvak, Lithuania—known in Yiddish as *Lite*—refers to the large geographical area located more or less within the borders of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania, once the largest country in Europe and the region where Litvak life and culture originally evolved some seven centuries or so ago. Thus for example the artists Mark Rothko and Marc Chagall were both Litvaks, as indeed was Simonas Rozenbaumas, the Pinsk-born politician who represented a newly independent Lithuania at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and who served as the Lithuanian Minister for Jewish Affairs between 1923 and 1924. Almost completely annihilated across the length and breadth of their native land during the Holocaust, the majority of today's Litvaks live abroad with barely 2,000 living in Lithuania today. Historically, Lithuania's Jews were made up of two distinct groups, the 'fun-loving' Hasidim who famously liked to dance and the more erudite and austere Misnagdim, of which the latter still often refuse to acknowledge that the former are Litvaks at all. It should be pointed out for the sake of clarification that not all Litvaks were (or are) religious. For the purposes of this book, the words Litvak and Jew/Jewish are more or less interchangeable.

Shtetl

The *shtetl* was the omnipresent pre-war Central and Eastern European market town where Jews lived in large numbers and that would always feature at least one synagogue, a *mikvah* (the essential Jewish bathhouse used for attaining ritual purity) and a place to bury the dead. More often than not portrayed as a dreamy and somewhat sentimental settlement thanks in part to the paintings of Marc Chagall and the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the traditional *shtetl* was in fact a considerably more down to earth place to live than the artists would have the world believe. A less nostalgic and ultimately more helpful depiction of everyday life in a former *shtetl* can be found within the pages of Grigory Kanovich's highly recommended 2017 *Shtetl Love Song*, a novel based on his own childhood memories of growing up in Jonava in the years immediately before the Holocaust. Well worth getting hold of, the book is published by the UK's excellent Noir Press and is available online at Amazon.

Former Marketplace

In a traditional *shtetl* the *shul* would often overlook a cobblestone marketplace (*marktplatz* in Yiddish), an essential element of every town's makeup where everything from horses to gossip were traded at least once a week. Most of Lithuania's pre-war marketplaces have been either radically transformed or completely destroyed, although surviving traces of them are surprisingly easy to spot once you know what to look for. The best—and the worst—example of a preserved former marketplace in Lithuania is the one in the middle of the State-owned outdoor ethnographic museum at Rumšiškės near Kaunas, a lovingly and meticulously restored marktplatz surrounded by traditional buildings of the period including a large wooden Catholic church—and no synagogue.

DON'T FORGET TO REMEMBER

The Fifty Schools Edition of *Back to Shul* is published independently by the International Centre for Litvak Photography (IC4LP) and is available free of charge to anyone with an electronic device capable of reading it. At the time of writing IC4LP is involved a number of diverse activities including our ongoing Fifty Schools project with Lithuanian teenagers aged between the ages of 15 and 17 that we plan to develop over the next two years with the help of this book, a forthcoming major exhibition and series of related cultural and educational events in partnership with the Yeshiva University Museum and YIVO in New York between October 2018 and March 2019 and several projects in Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden and Germany all connected in one way or another with the promotion and preservation of Lithuanian and European Jewish cultural heritage and memory.

Don't forget to remember that IC4LP is a tiny organisation operating from the author's kitchen table that relies almost entirely on public donations to carry out its work. If you've enjoyed reading it then please think about making a small financial contribution to support our work. If you don't have a lot of money and aren't sure how much to donate, we believe that a €10/£10/\$10 is a reasonable amount that can make a genuine difference. Donations can be made in a number of different ways, including PayPal, cheque and international bank transfer. Thanks to the kindness of our donation partners in the United States it's also possible to make a tax

deductible 501(c)(3) donation. For more information see litvakphoto.org/donate or write to us directly at donate@litvakphoto.org.

Thank you for taking the time to read this book. Please share the link below with friends, family and colleagues. Richard plans to spend the rest of 2018 working on a number of different projects including working towards the commissioning of a structural report on the former New Šančiai Synagogue and—a first for Kaunas—preparing the design and installation of a long overdue plaque on the building to remind passers by of its original purpose.

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