

Lithuania, Here We Come!

Our Trip to Al Jolson's Homeland

by Andrea Oberheiden

We had big plans for 2010. We have been working on our Al Jolson feature documentary since 2006, shortly after we had discovered him in one of the film lectures we had attended at the University of Hamburg. We can truly say that Al Jolson changed our lives. Not only is he responsible for a major film project we put our heart and soul into, he also shaped our interests like no one else and nothing else before him.

Our last huge Jolson trip was in 2008. We were a little worn out after 2 ½ years of continuous research, organizing, financing, travelling, promotion work, and studying. We were always looking for the right moment to travel to Lithuania, Al Jolson's homeland. We wanted to spend lots of time for research and organizing things. I do not remember how often we actually postponed our trip to Lithuania in 2009, but at some point it was obvious that it was not going to happen. Financial, personal, and physical problems added to that inevitable decision. The only thing we did manage in 2009 was to get our documentary *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer* and *The Jazz Singer* itself onto the big screen in Kiel. I still recall that amazing feeling when we were able to watch *The Jazz Singer* in our hometown. It was the first time after its last screening there in 1930, shortly before movie theatres in Germany were governed by the Nazi ideology. On a personal note, a film about Al Jolson was the first and last film my father ever saw in a movie theatre since he decided to attend our film premiere despite his health problems.

2010 looked a little better. We tried to stay away from university to get back on our feet. Yet there seemed to be enough will and energy to turn to Al Jolson again. Although we were neither able to attend the Bar Mitzvah of a friend's son nor the Milwaukee Jolson Festival, at least Jens was able to fly to Omaha in June to support Kirk Estee's and Marv Freeman's *Jolson Service Project*. I followed the trip over the internet. Talking to Jens on Skype and looking at the pictures he took constantly reminded me of where I myself should have been. All I did was walking my dog during that time. I felt like a prisoner kept away from life, and I finally decided to quit isolation and to fight that fear of getting back to life. I had a dream and no intention to let my body destroy its realization. When I picked up Jens at the Hamburg Airport after coming back from Omaha, I told him that we were leaving

for Lithuania in six days. I had arranged to meet with a Jewish American travel group which was about to make root tours in Kaunas, Lithuania at the end of June. Kaunas, or Kovno, is the next bigger city to Seredzius where Al Jolson was born. Thanks to Harry Jolson, Jolson fans know that Al himself was in Kaunas as a child. I could not let us miss out on that. The travel group had allowed us to join them, to film them, and there was even someone with a Jolson connection about to come. We cannot thank Bruce Wexler enough for telling us about this group. Without the contacts coming from that group, none of our future achievements in Lithuania would have been possible. Yet we could not know what a lasting impact this trip would have on us.



Jens Reinke interviewing a Korean War veteran in Omaha



Jens Reinke with Kirk Estee



Jens Reinke at his Jolson table at the Strategic Air & Space Museum in Omaha

My problem at the time was serious migraine attacks, sometimes four times a week. Since I never knew when they were coming, we decided not to fly to Lithuania but to travel by car. That way I had the chance to take a timeout whenever it was needed. It took us three days to get to Lithuania. We spent the first night in Frankfurt/Oder and the second one in Warsaw. I was looking forward to seeing that city, but it was horrible. Houses that used to be beautiful were unspeakably run-down, communist architecture and most unfriendly people made us feel less human. We were happy when we left for driving on and concerned that things might get worse the further East we travelled.



Andrea and Jens (with dog Joey) in Warsaw

And we were not disappointed. We had a passport check and a meticulous car searching on rural roads in Poland. This is usually not practiced anymore since Poland became a member of the EU. We had caught the officer's attention before he helped a farmer to move his cows across the street. After 12 hours of driving we noticed that we had gotten off track and that we were about to cross the border to Belarus. That was something to avoid. We had read horrible stories from people who entered Belarus. We were later confirmed by one of the travel group members who dared to do the same. Eastern Europe still is a different world.

Our attempt to find something to eat in Poland was nothing but frustrating. We got half-raw and liquid scrambled eggs and a tuna-tasting salad. Jens later revealed that it was actually a chicken salad. At some point we decided to adapt to the uncivilized surroundings and cooked our own meal with a gas cooker between two fields with cows and pigs. I only mention briefly that we happened to sit on a giant anthill while having our "dinner". We finally arrived in Vilnius, Lithuania on day 3 late at night. I am happy to be able to say that Lithuania is completely different from Poland.

People were friendly, houses and gardens were neat, the food was delicious.



In Poland close to the border to Belarus



Jens heating up a soup in Poland

We had a marvellous time with that Jewish American travel group. We were able to get great footage and interviews. One man brought an Al Jolson sheet music (*Dancing The Blues Away*) with him, and he and his sister gave us an interview about their father who was a big Jolson fan.



Jens inside the Ninth Fort in Kaunas



A street in the former "small ghetto" in Vilnius

But we also visited disturbing Holocaust sites. Sometimes it was more than weird that Jens and I were the only Germans (and non-Jews) in that group while everybody was looking at photos, newspapers, video footage, and other archival material telling about horrible crimes committed by Germans. Sometimes we acted as translators which was the weirdest thing to do. Yet there was not one single moment in which the group gave us the feeling of not being a part of them. Although this was an Al Jolson trip, I have to admit that this was actually the most astonishing feeling and the most meaningful moment I brought back home to Germany. On that trip I understood on how many levels Al Jolson was able to enrich both our lives.



The only remaining synagogue in Vilnius which was not destroyed during the Holocaust and Soviet times

Lithuania was once known as the *Jerusalem of the North*. More than one million Jews lived on the historic Lithuanian territory until more than 90% of them perished in the Holocaust.

We started our trip in Vilnius, made our way west to Kaunas, and eventually to Seredzius where Al Jolson was born.



Vilnius cathedral and bell tower

It was a memorable moment when we first moved into our apartment in Kaunas. I brought Harry Jolson's book with me and read the passages about the Jolson family trip to Kaunas when he and Al were still little. I tried to find houses old enough to be a part of Jolson's childhood times. The oldest house I could find said it was built in 1896.



Kaunas



Kaunas pedestrian street
Andrea sprained her toe the day before



Inside the Blue Synagogue, the only remaining synagogue in Kaunas



The last wooden synagogue in Lithuania (in Ziezmariai)



Summer and winter synagogues in Kedainiai, the city where Moshe Yoelson married Naomi Cantor

After more than one week of several meetings and trips to local sites, it was time to get to Seredzius. Thanks to the travel group, we got in touch with a Jewish guide who wanted to drive with us to Seredzius. We made the appointment, but wanted to visit Seredzius on our own several days before the meeting. Seredzius is located about 7 ½ miles west of Kaunas. The highway actually leads from Kaunas to Klaipeda, the port at the Baltic Sea, and was built after the country's independence in 1991. It mostly runs parallel to the Nemunas River. While we were driving, we tried to picture the Jolson family on the steam boat

they took from Seredzius to Kaunas as it is described in Harry Jolson's book. We were so excited that we made several stops on our way to Seredzius just to extend the trip.



Harvest time on our way from Kaunas to Seredzius

The only disturbing thing was the way Lithuanians drive. I am not really known as a slow driver but I still drive safely. Lithuanians don't. There is definitely a reason why they have one of the highest rates of road deaths in Europe. Another disturbing thing was the endless number of people sitting next to the road. They were selling goods and they were hoping that some of the speedsters would stop to buy something. They were not only sitting very close to the road but also on the very bottom of the street. It was like driving with highway speed through a picnic area while you are trying not to run the people over.



When we were approaching Seredzius, we were busy with filming and taking pictures. I was constantly thinking of what kind of footage I wanted to have for our documentary. There was not too much time to realize where we actually were and what it really meant. But once we got out of the car to take a picture with the Seredzius sign next to the highway, it changed. There we were standing, looking at the Seredzius houses, most of them still being wooden. We had not entered the city yet, however, we were able to see lots of houses

from the highway. On the other side of the highway there was the Nemunas River where Al Jolson and his siblings used to play when they were children. Behind the Nemunas River used to be Poland in Jolson's times, today it is also part of Lithuania.



Some houses of Seredzius as seen from the highway

When you come from Kaunas, you need to turn right to enter the city. You then approach a T-junction, both directions lead onto the main street, but the city center is on the right. We just followed the main street. The only thing we knew about Seredzius was that the population was smaller than during Jolson's time. Back then it had almost 2,000 inhabitants and a large Jewish community, today it is less than 800 and there is no Jewish community anymore. When we drove through the city for the first time, we had no idea how old the houses were or which part of the city used to be the center of the Jewish community. But this lack of knowledge led to boundless imaginations of young Asa sleeping, dreaming, singing, playing, and walking down the street.



The main street of Seredzius. In the background is the old cobbled pavement of the 1930s

The city basically has one main street but we turned into every little side road there was. That way we managed to find the Jewish cemetery all by ourselves, or better what is left of it. In the whole city, there is only one official

sign that marks a Jewish site, and this is the one at the Jewish cemetery. It is located next to a Catholic cemetery which is still in use and on top of a hill. You reach it when you turn left at the end of the main street. We later found out that the main street was also known as the Jewish street. The cemetery was already there when the Jolson family lived in Seredzius.



The Jewish cemetery of Seredzius

There are only two tombstones left to find, one of them is broken and lying on the path leading to the Catholic cemetery. When we later returned with a translator, we found out that a member of the Jewish community was buried there when the Jolsons were still living in Seredzius. The translator who also is a historian stated that all of the Jewish community members had to be present at the funeral service in the synagogue, especially the children of someone who worked at the synagogue. Since the Jolson family was already living in Seredzius when they lost the baby that was born before Al Jolson's own birth, it must have also been buried there.



The remains of the synagogue of Seredzius

When we came back to Seredzius with our Jewish guide Chaim, he instantly led us to the most amazing site there is: the remains of the old synagogue of Seredzius. Harry Jolson describes two synagogues in his book, one being in daily use and another one for the

more important feasts. The remains belong to the last one. It burnt down several times but was always rebuilt until the Nazis destroyed it after locking up the male Jewish inhabitants of Seredzius before they were being killed. It took a while until we were able to realize that this was the place where Moshe Yoelson worked and where young Asa must have sat and listened to the songs that were sung during services. We actually had to come back on another day to have this moment for ourselves and to do some filming.

On that day we even met a young mother who happened to speak German because her husband came from Germany. She recalled her grandmother talking about the times when Jews were still living in Seredzius until they were deported and killed by the Nazis, unfortunately with the help from Lithuanian neighbors. We also talked with that mother's daughter who was about 6 years old. She proudly told us that she had a friend in school who looked "like chocolate". Hearing that child saying this with such innocent pride and not a sense of demeaning intentions, it reminded us of the young Jolsons seeing black kids in Washington D.C. for the first time.



Former Jewish house in Seredzius



Former Jewish house in Seredzius

Our guide Chaim also explained which houses were formerly inhabited by Jews and which not. Every house with a door to the front was a Jewish house. Jewish merchants wanted their customers to come in, so the doors were at the front of the houses. Lithuanians don't do that (it is also uncommon in Germany). That explained why most of the doors were either taken out and replaced by stonewalls or windows, or just not used anymore.



The door of this formerly Jewish house has been taken out



One of the oldest buildings in Seredzius (built in the 1930s)

None of the houses of Jolson's time are still standing. A fire in the early 20th century almost destroyed the whole city. The oldest houses you can find are from the 1930s. They have not been changed much except for the front doors.

What irritated us was that there was no sign at all that said that there used to be Jews who were killed by the Nazis living in these houses. There was a sign close to the main street which marked a historic site. But when we followed it, it led to a site commemorating Soviet crimes executed against (non-Jewish) Lithuanians. I just thought that there is an understandable difference in how Germans and Lithuanians deal with their past. We later found out that there is more to it than just that.



The biggest formerly Jewish house in Seredzius
(now abandoned)



The oldest formerly Jewish house in Seredzius

Chaim also brought us to the remains of a bridge that was built around 1900. It was destroyed by the Nazis and later dismantled by the Soviets. It used to be the only way from Seredzius to Kaunas and crossed the Dubysa River.

Another brilliant idea of Chaim was to visit the mayor of Seredzius. It was a spontaneous idea. The mayor was very nice but did not speak a word of German or English. Since Chaim spoke English, Lithuanian, and Yiddish, we had no communication problems at all.

The mayor was the only person we talked to who knew who Al Jolson was. He said that he once received a book on Jolson as a gift from a Jolson fan from the USA. He went into his house and showed us the book, it was Herb Goldman's Jolson biography! The mayor mentioned a monograph on Seredzius in which Jolson is being mentioned as one of the famous sons of the city. Herb's book was the source for the Jolson chapter. Unfortunately, the book is only available in Lithuanian, but still Jolson looks very good in it.

I already had the idea of a potential Jolson plaque in my head and it was suggested to the mayor. He liked the idea but thought that it was

only relevant for tourists. No one in Lithuania knows who Al Jolson was. It would be difficult to arrange something like this.



Jens with Chaim and the mayor of Seredzius

We left Lithuania with that thought and came back in early October. We had arranged a meeting with the mayor and told him that we had two Jolson relatives with us, Jon and Francie Hess. The mayor himself had arranged a meeting with the governor of the region, and the whole project was even discussed in Lithuanian newspapers, on television, and radio. Everybody was proud to have Al Jolson's relatives in Lithuania. The governor suggested an artists' competition to create the plaque. The project is still on its way.



Jens, Francie Hess, the governor, Jon Hess, and the mayor of Seredzius

Another important meeting we had was with Wyman Brent, founder of the first Jewish library in Lithuania since 1943. He is actually a Gentile from California but now lives in Vilnius, Lithuania. He contacted us in September of 2010 because he wanted to buy a copy of our documentary *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer*. He saw a link to our website on imdb.com. When we heard he wanted to put the film in his library, we donated the film along with lots of other Jolson material. Just imagine having Al Jolson's songs and films available to the public in his homeland, for the first time ever! We

arranged to meet him together with Jon and Francie Hess on the second trip to Lithuania in early October. Unfortunately, I was unable to accompany Jens.



Jens with Jon and Francie Hess in Seredzius

When Jens came back, I took a look at the photos and the footage he brought home. I kept in contact with Wyman Brent through email, and at some point I felt that he in some ways was our mirror image. He also had a dream and started just with that. And he keeps on going to realize his dream. We share a similar interest in Jewish history and culture without being Jewish ourselves. His goal though is much bigger than ours. His Vilnius Jewish Library will be much more than just a library. He wants to create an English as a second language library as well as a cultural center in a country of current nationalistic ethos which still has to deal with anti-Semitism.



Jon and Francie Hess, Jens, and Wyman Brent with Jolson material for the library

We did learn a lot about the current situation in Lithuania thanks to him. There are anti-Semitic depictions in public institutions such as museums as well as anti-Semitic articles in newspapers. It is not the ethos of the majority of the people but it is there. Lithuania's role in the Holocaust is a sensitive issue. They had the highest number of European collaborators who helped the Nazis to kill Jews. Lithuania

now mainly sees itself as a victim of Soviet crimes, which it also is. This is the reason why you won't find many official Holocaust sites in Lithuania. If they are there, they are mostly launched and financed by private organizations or individuals. Mr. Brent himself received death threats for what he does but he still continues to build the Vilnius Jewish Library which is about to open in spring of 2011.



Wyman Brent with the stored items for the library

Now he does have the support of the Lithuanian government which has provided a wonderful space for the library located in the very heart of Vilnius. The government will also pay for staff and equipment. The only thing the government does not provide is the material. So far, Mr. Brent has received donations from various institutions and individuals. Among them are Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Hadassah at Brandeis University in Waltham, Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center in La Jolla, the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, individuals like the famous Leonard Nimoy, Judy Chicago, Richard Meier, and Sir Martin Gilbert. Everything else comes from Mr. Brent's own resources. He is looking for books, DVDs, CDs, photos, and artwork of which the creator or the topic happens to be Jewish. The selection is supposed to be as broad as possible. The Holocaust will be a part of the library. However, the focus lies on celebrating culture created by Jews.



Wyman Brent at his second library event in Vilnius 2009

Mr. Brent just recently found out that Al Jolson was born in Lithuania. With more Jolson material being donated to him, there will be a permanent Al Jolson collection in the Vilnius Jewish Library. We also discussed a possible Al Jolson event with film screenings and panel discussions. I hope that all Al Jolson fans will see the great possibilities of this unique project and decide to support it in the way they can. Lithuania could be a new and so far neutral audience for Al Jolson that might be truly proud of his accomplishments and him being a Litvak. Lithuania does have issues with anti-Semitism but it is not an anti-Semitic country. The library already has the 3 DVD set of *The Jazz Singer*. It would be great to have a signed copy of Herb's Jolson biography there, as well as all of Jolson's films.



With Wyman Brent at Kristallnacht ceremonies in Kiel

Impressed by Wyman Brent's enthusiasm and the possibilities for promoting Jolson, I wanted to support his courageous project on a bigger level. After all, the opening of the library is about to take place in Al Jolson's homeland! I had the idea of having Mr. Brent come over to Kiel to realize some support from Germany. I wanted him to attend Kristallnacht ceremonies in Kiel on November 9th, and I also saw the potential this footage would have for our Jolson documentary. And so things did happen.



With Rabbi Walter Rothschild in Kiel



At the Rendsburg Jewish Museum



Donations from Jens, me, and Jewish German celebrities

Jens and I were able to arrange lots of meetings with potential donors in a very short time. We also travelled to Hamburg and Berlin and received donations from the Institute of German Jewish History, the Rendsburg Jewish Museum, the Berlin Holocaust Memorial, the Berlin Jewish Museum, several German book publishers, DVD and book stores, as well as Jewish German actors and writers. Mr. Brent came back to Germany in late December to meet with several political officials.



Andrea, Wyman, and Jens in Kiel

Like our Al Jolson discovery before, our encounter with Wyman Brent seems to result in a prolific, lasting, and personal bond.