

Because It's My Dream Wyman Brent and the Vilnius Jewish Library

by Andrea Oberheiden

In September of 2010 we received an email from Wyman Brent. He said he was the founder of the Vilnius Jewish Library and would like to purchase our documentary *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer*. He had seen a link to our website (www.aj-images.com) on imdb.com. When we heard that the film was supposed to become a part of the library collection, we decided to donate the film along with our other Jolson shorts. The thought of having Jolson material available to the public in Lithuania, Al Jolson's homeland, was just overwhelming. That is not even reality in the USA, the country that made him a star. Today Al Jolson is mainly known for his role in the first talking picture *The Jazz Singer*. He was an entertainer before the word was even coined. During his tremendous career which lasted four decades before he died in 1950, he had influenced stars like Frank Sinatra or later Elvis Presley.

We are two graduate students of film and literature at the Christian Albrechts University in Kiel, Germany. Since 2006 we have been working on a feature documentary about the legendary Jewish American entertainer Al Jolson. *Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer* along with some other Jolson shorts was just something we accomplished on the way to our feature film. We got captured by Al Jolson when we saw him in the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, back in 2005. That really started our distinct interest in Jewish culture.



Jens Reinke and Andrea Oberheiden in Seredzius,
Lithuania, the place Al Jolson was born

Unconsciously, it had always been a part of my life. I grew up with hearing stories about the Second World War and the tragedies that had happened to my grandmother's Jewish

neighbors in Kiel. My grandmother even tried to hide a young Jewish woman who was friends with a Jewish couple my grandmother used to trade goods with. Unfortunately, the woman was discovered by the Gestapo. All of my grandmother's friends and neighbors disappeared eventually. My mind created images of all these people my grandmother was talking about, and they never left me. Hearing these stories marked my first encounter with the Holocaust. I am now friends with several Jewish people around the world, among them are also the children of Holocaust survivors. Yesterday's images turned into images of today which tell a different story.

We kept in contact with Wyman Brent and started to work on getting the films Al Jolson himself made in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s into the library as well.



Wyman Brent in Lithuania

Mr. Brent's initial email had actually caught us between our two 2010 trips to Lithuania. We had made the first one in June and July and were about to visit the country again in early October. This time we came with two Jolson relatives, Jon and Francie Hess. Of course, we also met Wyman Brent.

He told us about his library project. I felt that in some ways he 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. However, his goal is much bigger than ours. The Vilnius Jewish Library will be the first Jewish library in Lithuania since 1943. Wyman Brent himself is actually a Gentile from California but he now lives in Vilnius to

work on the project of his life. He had the idea for the library back in 2004 when he saw a friend's interview with a Rabbi appear in the *Jerusalem Post*. "Before I had the idea for the library, I had been a drifter all my life", he admits. He had travelled through the USA and Europe for years, always looking for something. With the library in Vilnius, once known as the "Jerusalem of the North", he finally found his "calling in life".

Wyman Brent himself has a difficult family background involving serious domestic violence. He never brought himself to start a family of his own. Thus, he considers the Vilnius Jewish Library to be his "legacy to the world".

The library will be much more than just a library. Brent wants to reach out to the young people by creating an English as a second language library as well as a cultural center in a country of current nationalistic ethos.



Jon and Francie Hess, Jens Reinke, and Wyman Brent with Jolson material for the Vilnius Jewish Library

There are anti-Semitic depictions in public institutions such as museums as well as anti-Semitic articles in newspapers. It is not the attitude of the majority of the people, but it is there. And it might be at a larger extent than one might expect from a European country. Many things happen openly on the political stage, but the EU does not intervene. "The Lithuanian government made it illegal to discuss homosexuality in public", says Brent. The purpose of the library is to promote tolerance and understanding. It not only tries to call attention to the discrimination against Jews but also to work against discrimination in general.

Lithuania's role in the Holocaust is a sensitive issue for Lithuanians. Lithuania had the highest number of European collaborators who helped the Nazis to kill Jews. More than 90% of the Jewish population in Lithuania was murdered during the Holocaust. This is also the highest rate in Europe. Lithuania now sees itself mainly as a victim of Soviet crimes,

which it also is. Lithuanian politicians only recently put the Soviet crimes committed to Lithuanians on the same level with the Nazi crimes. Holocaust sites in Lithuania are mostly launched and financed by private organizations or individuals. Mr. Brent himself received death threats for his work but he still continues to build the Vilnius Jewish Library which is about to open in spring of 2011, 70 years after the Nazi invasion in Lithuania. The Lithuanian president will attend the grand opening.



Wyman Brent with the stored items for the library

"Lithuania was neither created by Catholics nor by Jews", Mr. Brent says. "Lithuania was created by all Lithuanians working together." He fell in love with the country thanks to a book, "The Hills of Vilnius". He read it while living in the Soviet Union. He had been interested in the Second World War since his teenage years but got highly interested in Jewish culture after an arts exhibition in Prague in the 1990s. The preserved paintings of Jewish children who had perished in the Holocaust touched him deeply. This is what might have shaped his concept for the library which focuses on the future and not on the past. The Holocaust will be a part of the library. However, the focus lies on celebrating culture created by Jews. This is what makes his project so unique. It has not been done before anywhere in the world.

"The library brought my three main interests together: reading, Jewish culture, and Lithuania", he says. He still believes in the future of books in a time of constant digitalization. The whole concept of the library will be as broad as the material collection itself. "People can read books, listen to music, watch DVDs, do digital research or grab a dictionary, or borrow material to take home." The live events are supposed to reach out to various audiences. "I want that people feel that it is their library, their cultural center. I want a modern library."



Wyman Brent at his second library event in Vilnius 2010

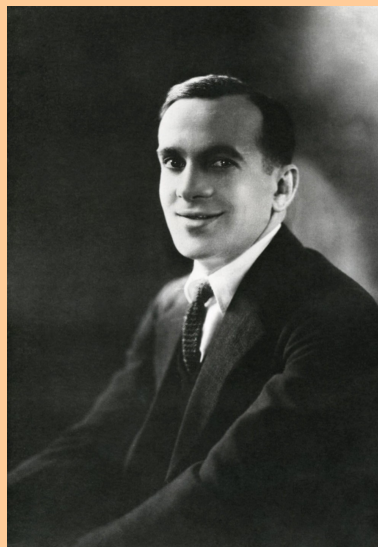
When he started his library project in 2004, there was only him and the idea. He bought books after books, had the support of his room mate in San Diego, and gradually received support from all over the world. Now he does have the support of the Lithuanian government which has provided a wonderful space 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.

Mr. Brent has received donations from various international 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 actor Leonard Nimoy ("Mr. Spock"), the artist Judy Chicago, the architect Richard Meier, and Sir Martin Gilbert, official biographer of Winston Churchill. Everything else comes from Mr. Brent's own resources. Although far from being rich, Brent himself spent tens of thousands of dollars for the library.

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. This is also reflected in the language selection of the books: Basically all kinds of languages are welcome in the library, although there will be a focus on English.

This concept of variety is what captured us. Something very similar had captured us when we first discovered Al Jolson. Suddenly we were driven to look at Jewish culture and history in a much more complex way than we, as Germans, were used to. 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.



Al Jolson (1886 – 1950)

My hope as a Jolson admirer and member of the International Al Jolson Society is that all Al Jolson fans around the world 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. It seems to be the right time not only to bring Al Jolson back to his homeland but also to open this library.



With Wyman Brent at Kristallnacht ceremonies in Kiel

Impressed by Wyman Brent's enthusiasm and the possibilities for promoting Jolson, we 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 also wanted him to attend Kristallnacht ceremonies in Kiel on November 9th.



With Rabbi Walter Rothschild in Kiel

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. We even got Marcel Reich-Ranicki to sign a copy of his autobiography *Mein Leben* (My Life) for the library.



At the Rendsburg Jewish Museum

Mr. Brent came back to Germany in late December and will stay until the end of January to meet with several political officials. Collecting donations and getting publicity for his project will be continued. We have additional plans for Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich.

We will visit Lithuania again in March of 2011. We now know that there is even more waiting for us than creating material for our Al Jolson project. After getting to know Mr. Brent, we saw an amazing story evolve, waiting to be told. Like our Al Jolson discovery before, our encounter with Wyman Brent seems to result

in a prolific, lasting, and personal bond. In addition to that, I already learned much more about my own family background. The whole topic brought my family and me closer together. I consider this a tremendous personal gain. Although my grandmother did not live to see this happen, I know that she would have loved to see all of these things happen.



Jens Reinke, Andrea Oberheiden, Wyman Brent, Johann and Ingrid Oberheiden



Donations from AJ-Images and Jewish German celebrities

As if it was not unusual enough that a non-Jew from sunny California moves to not so sunny Lithuania to open a Jewish library, Mr. Brent intends to spend the rest of his life in Vilnius to function as the shames, the caretaker of the library. Before I am able to put my surprise into a question, he says: "Because it's my dream."

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