**Title:** Invitation to a Children's Chanukah Play in the Vilna Ghetto, 1942

**Year (Hebrew):** 5703

**Year:** 1942

**Location:** Europe – Eastern

**Short description**

An invitation to a Chanukah play in the Vilna Ghetto from the Stuzkever collection at the National Library of Israel.

**Detailed description**

​​This is a colour painting of a pastoral scene including fields, houses with red slate roofs, and a windmill. Underneath the drawing there is text in Yiddish.

This painting was used as scenery in a play performed by children at a dormitory in the Vilna Ghetto. It is unclear whether the dormitory at 4 Strashun Steet was used as an orphanage or as another kind of school or children's institution. Next door to this building, at 6 Strashun Street, there was a well-known Jewish library and school.

Jews in the Vilna Ghetto, as in other ghettos in Nazi Europe, engaged in many cultural activities such as theatre, music, art, and literature. This was intended as a distraction from the difficulties of daily life and gave both participants and audiences something to look forward to. It was also an attempt to defy the Nazis, a type of spiritual resistance. Children's theatre was seen as a way of shielding children from the horrible realities of ghetto life by allowing them a creative outlet. This scenery may perhaps allude to the dreams of the ghetto children; the open fields and sunny skies certainly do not reflect their cramped and dark living conditions. The play *One Chanukah Candle Less* was created by children in a children’s home. These children had probably been orphaned or their parents could not care for them under the harsh ghetto conditions.

This painting underwent a fascinating journey from the forests of Lithuania to Moscow and finally to the National Library in Israel. Abraham Sutzkever, a Yiddish author and poet, managed to escape from the Vilna Ghetto, carrying a number of artefacts from the ghetto with him. He joined the partisans, and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the Soviet Union managed to convince the Soviet authorities to airlift him into Moscow. The first plane sent to bring him was brought down by the Nazis, and Sutzkever fashioned a suitcase from the fragments of the plane. The second attempt was a success, and Sutzkever was flown to Moscow along with his suitcase filled with his writings and rembrances of the war from the Vilna Ghetto. Among the many documents in the suitcase was this drawing of the scenery for the Chanuka play. Sutzkever eventually moved to Israel in 1947 and donated the suitcase and its contents to the National Library of Israel for safekeeping.

**Would You Like to Know More?**

**Chanuka** - Chanuka celebrates the rededication of the Temple by Judah the Maccabee and his army after their victory over the Greeks in 165 BCE. One of the well-known miracles of the Chanukah story is the small portion of oil that was able to light the Menorah in the Temple and burn for eight nights. Chanukah begins on 25 Kislev and is celebrated by lighting a Chanukiya for eight nights. It is also traditional to eat fried foods (to symbolise the oil) and play with spinning tops known as *dreidles*.

**Ghetto** – The first ghetto was established in Venice in 1516. The name is thought to originate from the “*getto*” (foundry) that was found near to the site of the Jewish quarter in Venice. Since this time, the word ghetto has been used to describe the segregated part of a town in which the Jews were forced to live and often prevented from leaving. Most Jewish ghettos were very crowded with difficult living conditions. Around many ghettos stood walls that were closed from the inside to protect the community during pogroms, but they also were used to prevent Jews from reaching Christian areas at certain times. Some famous (or infamous) ghettos and Jewish quarters include Josefov in Prague, Le Marais in Paris, Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam, Kazimierz in Krakow, and Judengasse in Frankfurt. In the nineteenth century, Jewish ghettos were gradually abolished and their walls taken down. In the twentieth century the word ghetto was used to describe the areas in which the Nazis confined Jews during the Second World War. These twentieth-century ghettos were in effect prisons, and due to the horrendous living conditions, many died of starvation and disease. The ghettos were one stage in the Nazi’s Final Solution; from there, the Jews were rounded up and sent to the death camps.

**Holocaust** – The Holocaust, also known as the Shoah, was the genocide and persecution of European Jewry by the German Nazi regime and its collaborators in Europe and North Africa during World War II. The Holocaust was implemented in stages from Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party’s first rise to power. From 1933 anti-Jewish laws were passed in Germany which excluded the Jews from German society. The Nazis also began to create a network of concentration camps where Jews and other “undesirable elements” of society were imprisoned in inhumane conditions. With the Nazi occupation of Europe during World War II, which started in 1939, the formal persecution of Jews was implemented in all the occupied countries. Jews were sent to ghettos, made to work in forced labour, and lived in appalling conditions. In 1942 the Nazis held the Wannsee Conference where they decided on the Final Solution which detailed the extermination all the Jews of Europe. Initially, more than one million Jews were exterminated by death squads named Einsatzgruppen, who were assisted by local collaborators. As of 1942 Jews were deported from the ghettos to death camps in Poland, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, where millions were murdered in gas chambers on arrival. Jews who were not immediately murdered were sent to force labour, and many died as a result of the harsh conditions, starvation, and disease. Jewish resistance was extremely difficult, but attempts to fight the Nazis were made by Jewish partisans and fighters in uprisings such as, most famously, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Sobibor Uprising. In 1944, as it became clear that the Nazis were losing the war, Nazi camp commanders began to close the camps and forced the survivors to march towards Germany. Already sick and weak from the years of violence, more than 250,000 Jews died on these death marches. The Holocaust came to an end with the defeat of the Nazis in May 1945. Six million Jews, two thirds of the Jewish population of Europe, were murdered with millions more experiencing tremendous suffering, violence, and loss. In addition to the Jews, millions of Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, disabled people, and Soviet and Polish prisoners of war were also murdered during the Holocaust.

**Yiddish** – Yiddish is a historic Jewish language originating in the Ashkenazi communities in the ninth century. It is based on a combination of German together with elements taken from Hebrew and Aramaic and is written either in Hebrew or English letters. Yiddish was the common language of the Ashkenazi Jewish communities for both for religious and secular use in Europe and, later on, in the United States. Much of the famous Jewish literature of Eastern Europe and the United States was written in Yiddish by writers such as Shalom Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and Isaac Bashevis Singer (who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978). The desire to integrate into mainstream society and the decimation of European Jewry during the Holocaust brought a great decline in the number of Yiddish speakers. Today this language is almost only spoken in ultra-Orthodox communities.

**The Jews of Vilna, Lithuania**– Jews were officially granted approval to live in Vilna, the capital of Lithuania in 1593. By the mid-seventeenth century, Jews made up a quarter of the city’s population. However, after the city was occupied in 1655 by Russia, the Jewish population declined. Jewish life continued despite pogroms and blood libels, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the city began to transform into a centre for Torah studies, culminating in the eighteenth century with the Gaon of Vilna who founded the Mitnagdim movement against the Hassidic movement. By the nineteenth century, the city was also home to Hassidic communities, Mitnagdim communities, and members of the *Haskalah* (secular enlightment movement), and a variety of schools, yeshivahs, and cultural and political societies were formed. Vilna was also a hub for the written word, with some of the first Hebrew journals printed in its printing presses. Vilna was so vibrant with Jewish life that it was nicknamed the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” In the late nineteenth century, a large number of Jews emigrated from Vilna to the United States and other countries. In the twentieth century more Jews left for Palestine as a result of the city’s very active Zionist movement. When the Nazis invaded Vilna in June 1941, the Jewish population was about 60,000. In the first two months approximately 20,000 Jews were killed. The Vilna Ghetto was established in August 1941. A strong resistance movement in the ghetto carried out a number of successful operations against the Nazi rule. Most of the Jews of Vilna were shot to death in the forest of Ponar or deported to the camps, but some survived by escaping to the forests and joining the partisans. After World War II about 16,000 Jews lived in Vilna, but under Soviet rule there was no organised community in the city. Lithuania became independent in 1990, and it is estimated that the majority of the approximately 2000-strong Lithuanian Jewish community live in Vilna. The community has two active Jewish schools.

**Teaching Suggestions**

​**​​Subjects:**

* Foreign Languages
* Art
* Jewish studies
* Jewish culture and heritage
* History
* Jewish history

**Discussion Points**

**Observation**

* What is this?
* Describe what you see:  
  Where is this?  
  What buildings can you see?
* What language/s can you identify?

**Reading Between the Lines**

* This is a picture of scenery used in a children's Chanukah play performed in the Vilna Ghetto in 1942.
* In which country is Vilan? Find it on a map.
* What was happening in Vilna, and Europe in general, at the time that this play was performed?
* What is a ghetto?
* Did you know that children performed plays while living in the ghetto?  
  What does this tell us about life in the ghetto?  
  Do you think it was important for cultural events to take place in the ghetto? Why?  
  Watch [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o31FI40yrWU) for more information.
* The play was called One Chanukah*Candle Less*.  
  What do you think the play was about?
* The text on this picture is in Yiddish.  
  What does this tell us about Jewish life in Vilna at the time?
* We know that this picture is a smaller image of the scenery used in the play and includes information about the play.  
  What could this have been used for? (e.g., invitation, poster)
* Who would the audience have been at this play?  
  How might they have reacted?  
  How do you think the children might have felt performing this play?
* The play was performed at the children's home.  
  Based on what you know about life in the ghetto, what do you think was the purpose of this home?
* Based on your knowledge of the Jews of Vilna during World War II, what do you think might have happened to the child who drew this picture or the children who played in this play?
* This image was preserved because Abraham Sutzkever took it with him when he escaped the ghetto. Sutzkever took a number of other documents as well.  
  Why would he choose to keep something like this?  
  Why is it significant?

**Connections**

* The text on this image is in Yiddish, and the play was also performed in Yiddish.  
  What language is Yiddish?   
  Yiddish uses Hebrew letters but is a combination of German and Hebrew. What Yiddish words do you know?  
  Who speaks Yiddish today? Is it a dying language? Why or why not?
* Do you act or perform?  
  How do you think being in a stressful situation might affect a performance?
* The scenery from 76 years ago was hand-drawn, and the invitation was hand-written. How has technology changed the way we see plays today?
* If this was designed as an advertisement for the play, how is it different to advertisements for plays today? What information is missing?
* Do you know of any other examples of Jewish cultural activities during the Holocaust? Why do you think it was important for people to continue doing these kinds of things even at the risk of getting caught and punished?
* Is there a Jewish community in Vilna today? Research it online.

**Creative Ideas**

* **​**Imagine you are one of the children participating in this play.  
  How do you feel before and after your performance?  
  How else do you spend your days?
* Create a play with the same title. What is it about? Who are the characters?
* Using this picture as background, create a scene from the play.

**Target audience:** Primary School, Junior High, High School, Informal Education, Higher Education

**NLI Links**

[NLI Treasures – Journeys, Video](http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLIS/en/Education/Pages/itemPage.aspx?ItemID=EDU_XML_ENGSP341)

[The Partisan Poet Rescued from the Woods of Lithuania, Hadar Ben-Yehuda](http://blog.nli.org.il/en/sutzkever/)  
[Korczak and the Children, Movie Poster, 1974](http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/digitallibrary/pages/viewer.aspx?docid=EDU_XML_ENG700175596&presentorid=EDU_XML_ENG&searchurl=http%3A%2F%2Fweb.nli.org.il%2Fsites%2Fnlis%2Fen%2Feducation%2Fpages%2Fresults.aspx%23%3Fquery%3Dlsr16%2Cexact%2CPrimary+Source%26query%3Dany%2Ccontains%2Cholocaust+children%26institution%3DNNL%26vid%3DEDU_XML_ENG%26loc%3Dlocal%2Cscope%3A(EDU_XML_ENG)%26sortField%3Dlso04%26indx%3D1%26bulkSize%3D8)