

From “Lekutei Shoshanim” until the “Paper Brigades”: The Strashun Library, Vilna.
— Frida Shor, Ariel University

Greetings -- I've been given 15 minutes to speak about the Strashun Library, which operated for more than 40 years. Just as one could summarize the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert with two words: “*Matan Torah*” [The Giving of the Torah], so I will too characterize the Strashun Library with two words: “*Mikdash Me'at*” [The Temple]. For this is the same way in which its chief librarian, Khaykl Lunski, regarded the library: “This is *the temple*, in which I was educated and witnessed the happiness of my life... sometimes, when I would pass amongst the bookshelves and glance at the religious books, which stood so upright and proud for hundreds of years, it would seem to me, that these were not books at all, but rather great spirits, living people standing before me. And I would converse with them, with living and immortal beings such as these.”

At last, we are speaking here on the topic of *body and soul*, and more precisely put -- of *matter and spirit*. Many nations and peoples built empires, magnificent material edifices, built chiefly with human blood, whereas the Jewish people were completely focused on building an empire of *spirit*, grounded in morality. And the Jewish people have not ceased in building this spiritual empire and they will continue to do so as long as they live. This is the only empire, which cannot collapse, be ruined, annihilated, or cease to exist. These intellectual treasures of the Jewish people have not only found their home in the Strashun Library in Vilna, but they have also inspired many people to dedicate their lives to its research, as well as for the writing of their own work; and, by doing so, they have made their own contributions to the inexhaustible intellectual treasures of the Jewish people.

The wealthy, private library of Matisyahu Strashun (1817 - 1885) served as the basis for the library. Matisyahu Strashun was considered a genius. He was called a walking library. As a thirteen-year-old boy, he married the eldest daughter of the magnet Yosef Eliyahu Elishberg and from that point on he became very affluent. His affluence enabled him to build an impressive rare book collection. In this connection, his house served throughout the course of his life as a center of *maskilim* [Jewish enlightenment thinkers]. Due to the fact that two of his sons died in their youth, he designated Jewish Vilna in his will as the recipient of his library. The library was moved to a building, which was custom made for it, and officially opened under its roof on October 20th, 1902.

Matisyahu Strashun's private collection consisted of around 5,750 religious and non-religious books, as well as Hebrew manuscripts. Their bibliographical contents were printed in the catalogue **Lekutei Shoshanim** (Berlin, 1889). Among them were five incunabula, as well as approximately 300 books from the 16th century. Throughout the years, many of the book collections of researchers, writers, and intellectuals were added to the library. By 1940, the library's collections amounted to 50,000 books. Amongst the estimated 30,000 catalogued

books, 13,000 were in Hebrew (except those that were described in **Lekutei Shoshanim**), and 5,478 books were in Yiddish. In fact, the Strashun Library was the biggest national Jewish library in the world and its net worth was appraised by the best bibliophiles to be around three million dollars.

The Strashun Library was essentially an accessible institution of religious and scholarly literature, which was open to the public throughout the week, closed only on the Sabbath afternoon. In its reading room, both men and women, religious and secular, young and old, religious students and university students alike studied side-by-side beside two long tables. The silence, which permeated the library, was never disturbed by debates or disputes amongst the readers, who represented a wide-spectrum of political opinions, worldviews, and lifestyles. In various periods, the number of visitors to the library fluctuated. For example, in 1925, close to 300 readers came to the library every day and approximately 100,000 came in the entire year.

The director of the library was Yitskhak Strashun, a relative of Matisyahu Strashun; and besides him, Khaykl Lunski (1881 - 1943), who worked in the library since he was 14 years old and right until its closing in 1941.

Lunski displayed the utmost professionalism in all aspects of the library -- from building, organizing, selecting, administering over and preserving its collections, to providing the readers with help and with bibliographical consultations. His depth of personality, command of the Hebrew language, and terrific expertise in the library's collections enabled him to help the reader locate whatever materials one desired. Besides being a librarian, who was well-liked by the visitors of the library, he was also a writer, a journalist, a bibliographer, a book collector, and the secretary of the [Jewish] Society for History and Ethnography. Lunski, who was devoted to the Zionist ideology, worked primarily on the tasks of documentation and memorialization. His preoccupation with these tasks was reflected in both his communal involvement and in his writings (written in Hebrew and in Yiddish), such as in his book *From the Vilna Ghetto* [Fun vilner geto]. Further, for embodying to a large degree the spirit of the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," he was honored with the title of the "Keeper of the Jerusalem of Lithuania." And in spite of the fact that he lived in squalor, Lunski provided many people with help.

The Strashun Library was a source of pride for the Jews of Vilna and it was renown amongst world Jewry. Prominent people would come from all over the world to visit the library; among them were: community leaders, writers, artists, researchers, and Zionist leaders. The impression the library made on them is echoed in the "Golden Book", i.e. in the guestbook, where they would leave comments. Thanks to Khaykl Lunski's article on this book, as well as to the numerous quotations he drew from it, we can track these visitors, despite the fact that the book itself vanished. For example, the Yiddish poet and playwright H. Leivik (the pen name of L. Halpern) visited the library on July 15, 1925, writing down in its pages: "What shall I write? Silence is best; I am awe-struck."

As I mentioned before, the Strashun Library established a name for itself and many experts spoke highly of its holdings. I will now take this moment to discuss two of these experts: the former, a doctor, who studied from 1934 to 1936 in the Institute for Jewish Studies in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the latter a professor of Jewish Studies. They both took an invested interest in the treasures of Jewish art and culture, and they both assumed a pivotal role within Hitler's special initiative, aimed solely at looting these treasures from all corners of occupied Europe, and in delivering them to the "Institute for Study of the Jewish Question" in Frankfurt am Main, which was headed by Alfred Rosenberg. The former was Dr. Johannes Paul, who, in being responsible for the daily operation of the institute, was sent especially by the Nazi party to study in the Hebrew University; the latter, on the other hand, was the professor for Jewish Studies in Berlin, Dr. Gotthardt, who arrived in Vilna in the Summer of 1941 and began to gather information related to Jewish collections in museums, libraries, and synagogues. When the Nazis commandeered the library, its director Yitskhok Strashun hung himself by his tefillin strap.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to many people for risking their lives to rescue the surviving remnants of the Strashun Library's prized possessions, including: the agents of the "Paper Brigade" and the director of the Book Palace of Lithuania, Dr. Antanas Ulpis, as well as Lucy Davidowitz, who found books from the Strashun Library in the warehouses of Offenbach in Germany, where millions of Judaica were stored after the war. These items were found in the "Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question" and Davidowitz worked in transferring them to the YIVO Institute in New York.

I want to especially praise the YIVO Institute for its stubbornness in not only preserving these books, but in giving them a *future*! I consider the Vilna Collections Project a resurrection of the Strashun Library in that it is a kind of declaration that the library will once again be open. Thanks to this project, the surviving remnants of this library will be accessible once more, drawing in people from all over the world, aiding them in their research and in the writing of their books. And, by doing so, it will contribute to the inexhaustible intellectual treasures of the Jewish people. I thank the YIVO Institute with my whole heart for the opportunity afforded me to present to you the history of the Strashun Library, where I see above all a history of the triumph of *spirit over matter, of the soul over the body*!

And I will conclude with these words, which were jointly written in the "Golden Book" by the author Moshe Shalit and the activist Dr. Shmuel Vays:

"Today on the tenth of May, 1933, under the ringing of music, Jewish books are being burnt in the bonfires of fanatic fools! Go to Vilna to the synagogue courtyards! You can burn everything; for you can break our bodies, but never the Jewish spirit."