SURVIVING HISTORY
Portraits from Vilna

Multimedia Exhibition
Photographs & Video
Documentary Screening
Visual Biographies & Art Installations
Seminar & Workshops
Surviving History: Portraits From Vilna presents the life stories of 10 individuals who survived the Holocaust in Lithuania where ninety-five percent of the 240,000-strong pre-war Jewish population was annihilated. The routes of escape were narrow; those who survived did so because they joined the partisans or the army, or escaped to Russia. Or because kind strangers hid them in basements and attics and on farms, because they slipped unnoticed through a hole in the ghetto gate, or somehow lasted in the camps until liberation. All of those interviewed lost family members to the Holocaust.

This exhibition explores the points of intersection where the personal and the collective collide. Drawing on an interdisciplinary range of media: photography, video, text, archival documentation, visual biography and biographical objects, it seeks to express how history is lived from the inside. Glimpses of the personal – a tiny bottle of perfume tucked into a pocket before fleeing the ghetto, a silent promise made beside a mass grave, shoes made from parachute material – typically absent from the historical record, are afforded prominence here.

We travelled to Lithuania to discover what remained of its once thriving Jewish presence. We found a city alive and teeming with memory, where every single thing – a powder case, a silver spoon, a photograph, a chess piece, a flower, a stone—speaks. As in the work of Yiddish poet, Peretz Miransky, ‘everything has its melody’ and its meaning. It is with the intention of honouring the melody, the essence of these individuals and their inimitable life experiences that we stage this exhibition.
“Thanks for reminding us to not forget.”
– P. Hannigan

Photo Exhibition

A selection of 45 photos serve as an introduction to the Jewish presence in Lithuania and the 10 narrators – in their homes, with their biographical objects, and in the places they brought us to, such as former shtetls, the cemetery, or mass graves. These are presented on 3 portable modular display systems measuring 2.6mW x 2.0mH.
The Vilna Diaries

This is a selection of 9 video clips pre-prepared and edited for presentation on a continuous loop using a solid state media player. The clips have been carefully chosen and edited to present a glimpse into the personal worlds of the 10 narrators, each varying between 1.5 to 3 minutes long. This exhibit comprises a 32-inch plasma screen and a modular counter of 900mmH x 400mmW x 700mmL.
Visual Biography Installations

This consists of 10 composite ‘wallpapers’ which represent the narrator’s external worlds. Affixed to each of these is a ‘memory cupboard’ which represents the narrator’s internal world and memories. These have been created by a collective of artists from the US and the UK – Birgit Muller, Dwora Fried, Katie Dell Kaufman, Lynsey Cleaver and Mike Moran. These are presented using a hinged folding display kit 600mmW x 1.8mH as backdrop, and the ‘memory cupboards’ are showcased on a display plinth.
Visual Biography Installations

The ‘memory cupboards’ offer a glimpse into the narrators’ interior world. Biographical objects represented within these ‘cupboards’ are explained in the narrators’ own words, from transcript excerpts, and its interpretation through artists’ statements.
“Such important work, so moving, beautifully conceived and presented.” – M. Creates
Shoah Memorial Installation

This creative installation provides a wider context in which to situate the personal histories of the narrators by commemorating the 200+ massacre sites in Lithuania. A ‘forest’ of light boxes surrounds the focal point of this installation – a map of Lithuania – accompanied by 228 bottles, labeled with the names of the sites and filled with beads to varying levels representing the number of lives lost at each location. Visitors are encouraged to explore and reflect on the immensity of this tragedy by handling these bottles.

The two-sided surfaces of the lightboxes are inscribed with the names of the massacre sites on one side and on the reverse, photo images of trees at Ponar, the largest mass killing site, and excerpts from eyewitness accounts and archival documents. A separate display plinth contains actual objects collected from the various killing sites, synagogue and cemeteries: candles, stones, and earth.
‘Surviving History’ Documentary

This 28-minute artistic documentary traces the journey of the researcher, Shivaun Woolfson. It begins with a poignant reflection on her findings at Ponar, the largest mass killing site in Lithuania. The audience is then transported into the living rooms of seven narrators, introduced to their stories, their memories and their current worlds. They are then led on a journey to the cemeteries, to the last remaining synagogue on Pylimo Street, and to the memorial sites commemorating those who perished in the Lithuanian Shoah. This documentary explores the complex and layered history of the Jewish experience in Lithuania including issues of local complicity and collaboration, and recent anti-Semitic activity. Awarded the Audience Poll Award at the IWM Film Festival 2010.

“An inspirational and deeply moving film.” – M. Kinnon
Public Talks and Events

- 9 Feb 2009 – Association of Jewish Refugees, UK
- 25 March 2009 – War + Conflict Lab series, University of Manchester, UK
- 29 March 2009 – Day Limmud, Brighton & Hove Council, UK
- 27-30 May 2009 – University College Dublin, Ireland
- 9 June 2009 – Spiro Ark, Central London, UK
- 3 and 16 June 2009 – University of Sussex, UK
- 10 Sept – 9 Oct 2009 – Tolerance Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania
- 11 Sept – 12 Sept 2009 – Teachers Seminar, Vilnius, Lithuania
- April – May 2010 – South Africa exhibition tour and teachers seminar: Cape Town Holocaust Centre, Rabbi Cyril Harris Centre Johannesburg, Durban Holocaust Centre
- 25 Jan – 29 Jan 2010 – Shirehall, Shropshire Council, Shrewsbury
- 24 Jan – 28 Jan 2011 – Exhibition and Teachers Seminar, Biddenham Upper School, Bedfordshire
Some Comments

"Powerful, moving and immensely eloquent."
– R. MacSweeney

"Heartbreaking."
– A. Fay

"Thank you for being the voice of many and for helping many to share their story."
– Father C. Crossey

"Thanks for reminding us to not forget."
– P. Hannigan

"Resilience and the human spirit in its rawest form!"
– R. Marron

"Powerful, thoughtful, beautiful and terrifying."
– I. Hill

"You manage to capture the moment of reckoning of an individual, which is rare and moving."
– G. Rollstone

"These memories should not be lost."
– M. Moran

"Moving and very inspirational."
– R. Noble

"Such important work, so moving, beautifully conceived and presented."
– M. Creates

"Moving stories that must be told, remembered and heard. Thank you."
– N. McCormack

"An inspirational and deeply moving film."
– M. Kinnon

"Powerful content and beautifully made film."
– M. Moor

"Unbearable to watch."
– F. McCafferty

"What man does to man – tragic."
– M. Kelly

"The afternoon at the LJCC was so moving and thoughtful. Thank you and all those involved."
– F. Davies

"I attended both evenings in Dublin and just want to say that I was very impressed by the film and talks."
– E. Wuelfing

"It was lovely to share yesterday the talks, documentary and exhibition. The talks complement each other: a survivor and active member of Vilnius Jewish community; a Lithuanian researcher and Shivaun, project director."
– S. Muniz