From Monologue to Dialogue? Museums, Memory, and Identity in the Vilnius Region*

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Introduction

Museums are not passive repositories of the past, but active agents in the construction of historical narratives, reflecting pre-

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vailing values, power structures, and ideologies that shape collective identity.[1] This role is particularly potent in borderland regions with complex, multi-layered histories. This article examines the museum landscape of the Vilnius region (*Vilnija* in Lithuanian, *Wileńszczyzna* in Polish), a territory in southeastern Lithuania and northwestern Belarus defined more by its historical and cultural legacy than by administrative borders.

Contemporary scholarship on the region has moved from early post-Soviet perspectives, which framed the region as an integral part of Lithuania whose inhabitants had lost their "true" identity, toward a more nuanced appreciation of its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity.[2] Recent studies emphasize the persistence of multilayered identities and critique state-led efforts to impose a single, hegemonic version of public memory.[3] Yet, as Monika Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė notes, there remains a need for more critical analysis of how the region's minority groups interact with public representations of their own history and culture.[4]

This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the region's museums today. Based on 30 interviews with museum practitioners, administrators, teachers, and community activists conducted from 2024 to 2025 as part of "Facing the Past: Public History for a Stronger Europe" (EUROPAST project), this study explores how these institutions navigate the complex heritage of the region. To understand the present, however, one must first understand the past. The current challenges and narratives found in the region's museums echo the challenges faced by ethnographic and local history work from the interwar period, as well as the historical traumas of foreign occupation, genocide and mass displacement of the Second World War.

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[1]   Macdonald, *Memorylands*.
[2]   Marcinkevičius, "Vilniaus krašto problematikos tyrimai;" Teškevičius, "Hegemonic and Multilayered Memories;" Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė et al. "Directions of Ethnicity."
[3]   Daukšas, "Kaip keičiasi lenkų savimonė ir tapatumas;" Teškevičius, "Hegemonic and Multilayered Memories."
[4]   Frėjūtė-Rakauskienė, "Lietuvos lenkų tapatumo tyrimai."

A Contested Heritage: Ethnography in Interwar Vilnius

Between 1922 and 1939, Vilnius was part of the Second Polish Republic and became a vibrant, multinational center for ethnological research. However, this scientific work did not occur in a vacuum. It was profoundly shaped by the political realities of a "nationalizing state" that sought to promote the interests of the core Polish nation, often at the expense of its large Jewish, Belarusian, and Lithuanian minorities.[5] Ethnologists from different national groups worked simultaneously – sometimes in cooperation, but more often in parallel or in competition – to document and preserve what each considered "their own" cultures.[6] These efforts, as noted by Anna Engelking, functioned both "together and apart," laying the foundation for the divided memory landscapes that continue to echo in the present.[7]

The primary engine of Polish ethnology in the region was the Department of Ethnology at the Stefan Batory University (now Vilnius University), was established in 1924. Led by prominent scholars like Cezaria Baudouin de Courtenay-Ehrenkreutzowa and later Kazimierz Moszyński, the university department and its associated Ethnographic Museum became the dominant scientific institution. As Michał Buchowski states, the creation of such university chairs was part of a broader state project to solidify a "nation-state space" through educational and nationalizing agendas.[8]

While professors at SBU conducted rigorous academic work and trained students from various national backgrounds, this research was often intertwined with the state's political interests. The Polish state funded research programs in its eastern territories, including the Polesie region, with the strategic goal of "strengthening the Polishness" of these multi-ethnic borderlands.

[5]   Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 5, 85.
[6]   Čiubrinskas, "Challenges to the Discipline," 102.
[7]   Engelking, "Together and Apart," 143.
[8]   Buchowski, "Polish Anthropology," 16–17.

Some ethnographers, like Stanisław Dworakowski, directly participated in this nationalizing mission. His 1939 study of the petty nobility in Volhynia and Polesie, commissioned by a government-backed committee, explicitly served a political agenda: providing arguments for the religious and national "revindication" of the Orthodox, Slavic-speaking local nobility to Catholicism and Polishness.[9]

In parallel with the state-supported Polish institutions, the Jewish community of Vilnius – "the Jerusalem of Lithuania" – developed a robust network of its own to document a rich past perceived as being under threat from both modernization and political instability. This effort was driven by the paradigm of "salvage ethnography" – an urgent mission to collect and preserve the remnants of Jewish heritage in the Vilnius region. Two institutions were central to this project: the S. An-sky Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society and the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO).

The An-sky Society, founded in 1919 by the famed writer and ethnographer Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport (1863–1920), was conceived as a pluralistic, non-partisan organization, which aimed to be a "treasury where there is collected everything with a relation to Jewish history, art, and ethnography."[10] The society focused intensely on the local experience, particularly documenting the devastating impact of World War I on Vilna's Jewish community, and functioned as a de facto municipal museum for Vilna Jewry. Its close relationship with the *kehillah* (the democratically elected Jewish communal authority) underscored its deep roots in the local community.[11]

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[9] Engelking, "Anthropology in a Nationalizing State," 151.
[10] Kuznitz, "An-sky's Legacy," 333.
[11] Ibid., 327. See also Fishman, E. David. *The Book Smugglers. Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis*. University Press of New England: ForeEdge, 2017; Sinkoff, N. "From the archives: Lucy S. Dawidowicz and the restitution of Jewish cultural property," *American Jewish History*, 100(1), 2016, pp. 117–147; Berkowitz, Michael. "Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. An-Sky's Ethnographic Expeditions," *East European*

For the ethnic Lithuanian community, the practice of *kraštotyra* became an urgent and powerful tool for a Lithuanian state grappling with a profound national trauma: the loss of its historical capital, Vilnius, to Poland in 1920. The term *kraštotyra* translates literally as "the study of one's own land."[12] With the heart of historic Lithuania under foreign control, the movement aimed to prove that the nation's authentic spirit resided in the language, traditions, and material culture of the Lithuanian-speaking peasantry, strengthening Lithuania's moral and historical claim to the contested Vilnius region.

As practitioners traveled through rural villages to document folk songs (*dainos*), dialects, and customs, their work took on the character of a cultural resistance. Each collected artifact – a woven sash, a set of farming tools, a piece of amber jewelry – was treated as evidence of the "Lithuanianness" of the land, implicitly countering Polish claims to the region. This effort was framed as a salvage mission, not just against modernization, but against the perceived threat of Polonization. By romanticizing an exclusively ethnic Lithuanian peasant past, the movement created a powerful, albeit exclusionary, narrative of ancient belonging that was essential for a nation that felt territorially and culturally besieged.

A key agent in this so-called salvage mission was the Lithuanian Education Society *Rytas* (Morning). It had been founded prior to WWI, in 1912, to preserve the Lithuanian language and national education of Lithuanians in specifically the Vilnius region within the Russian empire. However, at least symbolically its role expanded during the period of the Polish occupation of the Vilnius region – it maintained established Lithuanian schools in the region and opened new ones despite the repressive policies

Jewish Affairs, 40(2), 2010, pp. 184–187; Bieliauskienė, Roza. "JIVO institutas kaip ypatingas institucinis darinys ir Vilniaus pasididžiavimas." In *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*. Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų centras, 2013, pp. 217–230, 545–546; Lempertienė, Larisa. "Liaudies kultūros pažinimas Lietuvoje: kai kurie lietuvių ir žydų sąskambiai." In *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*. Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų centras, 2013, pp. 168–187.

12   Mačiulis, "Kraštotyros muziejai," 235.

of the Polish administration. By 1926, 7 years into the Polish occupation of Vilnija, *Rytas* was responsible for over 100 schools and 1 teachers' college; however, this number had decreased by about a quarter by the beginning of the 1930s.[13] Beyond establishing schools, this Society offered courses (also for adults) and engaged in ethnographic and local history activities, such as organizing religious services, traditional Lithuanian celebrations, conducting *kraštotyra* explorations or writing the histories of schools in the region.[14] *Rytas* activities and influence waned in the beginning of the Soviet occupation; yet in the Interwar period it remained central to sustaining the national story of a stolen ethnically pure Lithuanian territory and by extension – stolen history and identity – that was picked up and exploited by scholars and politicians alike during the *Sąjūdis* period and the 1990s after the country regained independence.

The Second World War and the subsequent Soviet occupation inflicted a series of catastrophic traumas that violently erased the multi-ethnic society of the First Lithuanian Republic. The Holocaust, perpetrated by the Nazis and their local collaborators, resulted in the near-total annihilation of Lithuania's vibrant Jewish (Litvak) population, which had for centuries been integral to the cultural and economic life of its cities and shtetls. Following the war, the new Soviet regime engineered further demographic shifts; the Polish population, especially in and around the now-incorporated Vilnius region, was largely "repatriated" to Poland, while other historic minorities like the Roma, Tatars, and Karaites were suppressed or marginalized. This brutal process of genocide and mass displacement left ethnic Lithuanians as the dominant group for the first time in modern history.[15]

This demographic rupture created a profoundly new context for the practice of local history. With the Jewish and Polish memory landscapes physically and culturally vacant, Soviet-era *kraš-*

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[13] Ereminas, "Lietuvių švietimo draugijos "Rytas" veikla, 112–136.
[14] Ibid., 120.
[15] Stravinskienė, "Sovietinė etninė politika," 2011; Stravinskienė. "Lenkija ir Lietuvos lenkai," 38.

totyra could easily build upon the ethnocentric foundations of the interwar period, now filtered through a Marxist-Leninist lens. Soviet policy promoted an ethnographically oriented heritage that celebrated the pre-Soviet rural peasantry as a "good," non-exploitative class, while simultaneously embedding this within a state-supervised narrative.[16]

The "local history" being studied was now that of a seemingly homogenous Lithuanian countryside, where the complex histories of vanished neighbors became a neglected, if not quite taboo subject, at least for a while. Under the Soviet regime, *kraštotyra* was institutionalized and ideologically controlled: local researchers were encouraged to collect folk traditions and artefacts that fit the image of a harmonious, peasant-based Lithuanian culture evolving naturally toward socialism. This selective remembering required forgetting. The multicultural past of interwar Vilnius such as the Jewish shtetls, Polish manors, Belarusian villages was omitted or depersonalized. Ruins of synagogues or churches were often reinterpreted as anonymous old buildings stripped of their ethnic and religious meaning. As Violeta Davoliūtė (2013) and Tomas Balkelis (2018) note, such depoliticized ethnography helped the Soviet state domesticate national identities, promoting unity while silencing trauma.[17] Yet traces of that plural world survived in private memory and local storytelling. The industrialization of the country brought an influx of Russian-speaking settlers, the wave of collectivization, glorification of the Soviet people, introducing a new, state-sponsored Soviet narrative of "people's culture." Consequently, the practice of local history was driven by a dual process: the official celebration of a sanitized, ethnographic Lithuanian past and the silencing of the recent, violent rupture, creating a fractured public memory where the rich, multi-ethnic history of the region was relegated to private remembrance or oblivion.

[16] Davoliūtė and Rudling, "The rustic turn," 2023.

[17] Davoliūtė, Violeta. *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania: Memory and Modernity in the Wake of War*. London: Routledge, 2013; Balkelis, Tomas. *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

The Contemporary Museum Landscape:
A Typology of Regional Memory

Today, this landscape is a diverse and eclectic mix of institutions reflecting different historical periods and ideological frameworks: interwar, Soviet, and post-Soviet. The EUROPAST research team visited thirteen museums in the Vilnius region, alongside at least 9 school museums, encompassing a dense network of various memory institutions, large and small. These institutions can be categorized into several distinct types, each playing a different role in preserving and interpreting the past.[18]

Figure 1. *A map of museums visited during the EUROPAST Research. Author: Rūta Vyšniauskaitė*

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[18] Not all museums in the Vilnius region have the so-called "museum status," which means that they have not been officially recognized as a museum by the Republic of Lithuania Law on Museums and are thus not subject to it. However, here we refer to all memory institutions as museums since they conduct traditional museum activities – collecting, sorting and displaying artefacts, organising exhibitions and educational activities, organising cultural events, employing museum practitioners, etc. It is also important to note that whilst Visaginas is not part of the Vilnius region in a historical sense (it was established in 1975), it has similarities with museums in the Vilnius region and provides a good case study.

Local History (*Kraštotyra*) Museums

The most prevalent type of museum in the region is the *kraštotyra* museum, an institution that combines elements of local history and ethnography. This dual legacy means that contemporary *kraštotyra* museums in the Vilnius region often face structural challenges. They operate within a cultural policy framework that tends to favor an ethnolinguistic concept of Lithuanian identity, which can marginalize the history of the region's Polish-speaking and other minority communities. Their exhibitions frequently center on a nostalgic vision of the past, showcasing traditional furniture, textiles, agricultural tools, and festive rituals. While valuable for preserving material culture, this focus often creates a "safe" and homogeneous version of history. Difficult and politically charged topics – such as the Holocaust, Soviet deportations, collectivization and other aspects of forced modernization during the Soviet period, not to mention local collaboration with occupying regimes – are rarely exhibited or are presented superficially, preventing a critical engagement with the region's more complex past. Examples of institutions that largely fit this model include the Vilnius Region Ethnographic Museum in Nemenčinė and exhibition spaces in cultural centers like those in Baltoji Vokė and Čekoniškės.

Memorial and School Museums

Memorial museums are another significant feature of the landscape, often established in the homes or locations associated with prominent regional figures. These institutions create an intimate connection between the visitor and individuals who made significant cultural, religious, or artistic contributions. Examples include the Władysław Syrokomla Museum in Bareikiškės, dedicated to the Polish-language poet, the museum of priest prelate Józef Obrembski in Maišiagala, which highlights his central role in the local Polish Catholic community, and the Museum of Folk Artist Anna Krepštul in Tabariškės. These museums serve as vital platforms for articulating regional and cultural identities

that may differ from the dominant national narrative. However, by focusing on a specific individual from a community-favorable perspective, they can also present an idealized form of memory that lacks critical reflection or broader historical context.

School museums are crucial yet vulnerable pillars of local memory. Spread widely across the region, from Rudamina to Eišiškės and Pabradė, these collections are typically maintained by one or two dedicated and enthusiastic teachers, often with minimal financial or institutional support. Most were founded during the late Soviet period and continue the *kraštotyra* tradition, with exhibitions dominated by ethnographic items donated by the community, mostly pupils and their families. These museums aim to play an important role in fostering students' pride in their local heritage and preserving cultural continuity in small communities. Here one can see a wide variety of artifacts, featuring in some cases very strong, patriotically-based narratives that avoid controversial topics, while in others, narratives are 'lost' and artifacts are allowed to 'speak for themselves' about the multilayered past (Soviet school uniforms, some artifacts from the 16th Soviet Lithuanian Army Division, etc.). Their reliance on the passion of a few individuals also raises serious concerns about their long-term survival, as teachers worry whether a younger generation will be willing to take over their work.

Figure 2. *Domestic and military artifacts at the Turgelių Lithuanian School. Soviet school uniform at the Aukštadvaris Gymnasium. Authors: Rūta Vyšniauskaitė, Neringa Latvytė*

Case Studies: From Monologue to Dialogue

The diversity of museum types reflects a broader evolution in museology. An in-depth look at specific museums reveals the practical challenges and immense potential of these institutions as they grapple with the region's history. This transformation can be understood through the stages proposed by Ignas Kapleris: Museum 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0.[19]

Museum 1.0 represents the traditional, authoritative institution focused on collecting and preservation, where the visitor is a passive observer and communication is unidirectional. Museum 2.0 marks a shift toward interactivity and dialogue, using technology and experiential learning to engage diverse audiences. Museum 3.0 positions the museum as a community partner and platform for social change, characterized by co-creation, inclusion, and social responsibility.

The well-established Nalšia Museum, the grassroots Visaginas City Museum, and the fragmented heritage of Eišiškės offer three distinct windows into the ongoing negotiation of memory in the region.

The Nalšia Museum: A Traditional Institution at a Crossroads

The Nalšia Museum in Švenčionys, the largest and oldest museum in the Vilnius region, is an excellent example of a traditional local history institution facing the challenges of modernization. The town of Švenčionys itself possesses a remarkably deep and complex history that provides a rich, if challenging, foundation for a museum narrative. Known since the thirteenth century, it has long been a multi-ethnic center, home over the centuries to Tatars, Jews, Russians, Poles, and Lithuanians. Its history is marked by dramatic events, including the 1863 Uprising, Polish occupation (1920–1939), the establishment of a Jewish

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[19]   Kapleris, "Skaitmeninių technologijų taikymas," 80–81.

ghetto during the Holocaust (1941–1943), and post-war partisan resistance and mass deportations. This layered past offers a profound opportunity for historical storytelling.

Figure 3. *Personal items gathered at the site of the mass shooting of Jews in Linkmenys, 1941. Source: website of the Nalšia Museum in Švenčionys, nalsia.lt*

The museum, which operated briefly between the wars and was re-established in 1945, holds an impressive collection of over 62,000 artifacts related to archaeology, regional history, and ethnography. A visit to the museum and conversation with its staff in the spring of 2024 revealed an institution that is, in many ways, a model of a classic *kraštotyra* museum. It is a repository of the region's antiquities and actively engages in traditional museum activities: hosting excursions, running educational programs, and organizing events. It has established valuable connections with the local community, including schools, the disabled community, and the remaining Jewish and Old Believer communities. In a notable step toward modernization, it is one of the few museums in the region that has integrated English into its exhibits, making it accessible to foreign visitors.

Despite these strengths, the museum struggles with its primary function: storytelling. The main exhibition, largely un-

changed since its creation in 2000, lacks a clear and compelling narrative. It presents a vast collection of objects but fails to weave them into a cohesive story that would convey the city's rich, multicultural, and often tragic history to visitors. The fascinating history of the museum itself – a story of preservation and persistence through shifting political regimes – is not told within its own walls. It functions as a classic Museum 1.0 institution, a place for passive observation rather than active engagement or critical reflection.

However, there is significant cause for optimism. The museum is currently undergoing changes, driven by a new management team that is actively seeking to innovate. The planned renovations suggest a potential for transformation, an opportunity to move beyond a static collection and create a dynamic narrative that does justice to the complex history of Švenčionys. This process marks a potential transition from a Museum 1.0 model towards a more interactive and dialogic Museum 2.0, reimagining its role as a central interpreter of a multi-layered regional identity.

**Visaginas City Museum:
Co-Creating Memory in a Post-Soviet City**

In stark contrast to the historical depth of Švenčionys stands Visaginas, Lithuania's youngest city. Founded in 1975 as a settlement for the builders and workers of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, the city was originally named Sniečkus after the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus (1903–1975). It is a quintessential Soviet "atomic city," planned and built for a specific industrial purpose. This origin story profoundly shaped its identity. Its population is exceptionally diverse, with residents from nearly 40 different nationalities, most of whom were brought from all corners of the Soviet Union to build and operate the plant. Today, almost half of Lithuania's Russian population resides in Visaginas. While not geographically part of the historical Vilnius region, its unique multiculturalism and its quest to forge a con-

temporary identity provide an instructive comparison – but also tell a typically uncomfortable 'Soviet' story.

The Visaginas City Museum, officially established in August 2024, represents a fundamentally different approach to museum creation. It did not inherit a historical collection but was built up from and in collaboration with various citizen-led initiatives, like the art residency programme "Taškas" (Dot), or a private collection of photographs, and citizen-science projects such as "Atominis Visaginas" (Atomic Visaginas), led by researchers at the Vytautas Magnus University. From its inception, it has reflected the dialogue between its professional staff and the city's residents, aiming to be built *with* and *for* the community. This approach firmly positions it as a potential Museum 3.0 institution – a platform for co-creation, polyphony, and social engagement. Its mission is not merely to document the city's short history but to become an open platform for its multi-ethnic community, a space for uniting diverse voices and experiences.

However, the museum's "uncomfortable" historical identity gives it the potential to become what the anthropologist James Clifford termed a "contact zone" – a space where different communities can meet, interact, and create multi-vocal narratives.[20] By inviting residents to share their personal stories and actively participate in content creation, it could potentially move beyond separated, dispersed, and disjoined narratives of different ethnic and Soviet migrant communities and become an agent of social transformation.[21]

The museum also faces a unique and complex challenge: the legacy of its creation. The concept of "multi-ethnicity" in Visaginas is not neutral; it is deeply rooted in the Soviet-era ideology of "friendship of nations" (Rus. *druzhba narodov*), which promoted a superficial, state-managed unity among different ethnic

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[20]   Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," 188–219.

[21]   For an application of this approach to narratives of Russian migrants and post-Soviet identity in the Baltic region, see Ene Kõresaar and Kirsti Jõesalu. "Slow Conflict on Display: On the Representation of Russophone Minorities in Baltic History Museums," *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* 72, No. 4, 2024, pp. 475–490, doi:10.31577/SN.2024.4.37.

groups. Many of the city's communities arrived as Soviet settlers, with little organic connection to the local Lithuanian landscape. The museum seems to pride itself in its atomic identity and sees it as a unique legacy worth protecting – the museum's website states "Lithuania had and *has* a nuclear power plant." The museum thus faces the challenge to avoid becoming a site for Soviet-era nostalgia. In addition, to unlock its Museum 3.0 potential, the Visaginas City Museum may become a space to discuss and debate nuclear safety, which is also one of its missions. It must deconstruct the colonial-style narrative of a "progressive atomic city" created by Soviet authorities and instead foster a space for critical historical consciousness, acknowledging the contradictions and complexities of its own origin story.

The Dispersed Heritage of Eišiškės

The case of Eišiškės offers a final, poignant perspective on the challenges of memory in the Vilnius region. Like Švenčionys, Eišiškės has a long, multi-ethnic past, but its heritage is marked by profound rupture and dispersal, particularly concerning its once-vibrant Jewish community, which was annihilated during the Holocaust. The town's memory is now fragmented, existing in tension between global representations and local attempts at reconstruction.

On a global stage, the memory of Jewish Eišiškės is powerfully preserved at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Its permanent exhibition features the "Tower of Faces," a three-story installation filled with over a thousand photographs of Jewish residents of Eišiškės taken between 1890 and 1941. These images, sourced from a single collection, serve as a haunting representation of an entire world that was lost, using the specific story of one *shtetl* to convey the universal tragedy of the Holocaust to an international audience.[22]

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[22] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Yaffa Eliach Shtetl collection," *Collections Search*, last modified July 28, 2022, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn60648.

Figure 4. *The Tower of Faces exhibition at the USHMM. The Ejszyszki Shtetl Collection. Author: Violeta Davoliūtė https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn5971*

On the local level, the work of memory is far more difficult and tentative. A new local museum was in the process of being created in Eišiškės during this research. This nascent institution faces the immense challenge of re-assembling a material heritage that has been almost entirely destroyed or scattered. It must also navigate the complexities of representing a traumatic past to a contemporary local community whose own memories may be shaped by different narratives, experiences, or deliberate silences. This juxtaposition between the global and the local in the case of Eišiškės starkly underscores the divergent ways in which memory is preserved and interpreted. It highlights how different communities of memory – the international Jewish diaspora, global museum visitors, and the current residents of the town – engage with the same history in profoundly different ways, making the task of any local museum incredibly fraught and deeply significant.

While the "Tower of Faces" powerfully memorializes Eišiškės, it is but one component of a much broader archival constellation preserving the memory of Lithuanian Jewry from the entire Vilnius region. In centers of the diaspora like New York City, institutions such as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research became crucial sites for this work. Here, the dispersed heritage of numerous shtetls was meticulously collected. For example, the Papers of Simon Palevsky offer an intimate view into the life of an individual from nearby Švenčionys, from his education at various yeshivas to his later life, providing a granular, personal perspective on the world that was lost. Simultaneously, the records of *Landsmanshaftn* – mutual aid societies formed by immigrants from the same town – and *Yizkor* books, collaborative memorial volumes compiled by survivors, offer invaluable narrative and genealogical testimony.[23] These collections represent a different, yet equally vital, form of dispersed heritage, one that is textual, communal, and rooted in the lived experience of the émigré community itself.

This rich diasporic archival presence offers a profound opportunity for the nascent local museum in Eišiškės and others like it across the Vilnius region. A deliberate strategy of international collaboration with these dispersed sites of memory – not only Jewish archives like YIVO, but also Polish cultural and heritage institutions abroad – could provide a critical pathway for the maturation of Lithuanian local history museums. Such partnerships, involving the digital repatriation of sources, joint online exhibitions, and shared genealogical projects, would facilitate the transition from a static Museum 1.0 model to a more dialogic and interactive Museum 2.0. Ultimately, this could foster a Museum 3.0 paradigm, positioning the local Lithuanian museum as a "contact zone" where current residents and the descendants of the diaspora can engage in the co-creation of a more complex, multi-vocal, and inclusive public history.

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[23]   Papers of Simon Palevsky, 1910s–1970s. RG 1172. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY.

Conclusion

The museums of the Vilnius region are at a critical juncture. They are the inheritors of a complex legacy, one shaped by the competing national projects of the interwar period and later overlaid with Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuanian narratives. This research reveals a landscape marked by inconsistent narratives, significant silences regarding minority histories, and persistent challenges related to funding, professional expertise, and institutional vision. The history of ethnography in interwar Vilnius shows that the region's heritage has long been a contested field, documented and interpreted "together and apart" by its Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian inhabitants. Today, the region's museums continue to operate within this contested space.

Most museums in the Vilnius region still operate primarily within the Museum 1.0 paradigm. Their exhibitions are often chronologically arranged displays of objects, with visitors positioned as passive receivers of information. However, signs of a transition are evident. Many institutions are entering the Museum 2.0 space by establishing a social media presence, participating in collaborative projects, and encouraging community members to share stories and artifacts. The move toward Museum 3.0, where the museum becomes a true open space for community co-creation, remains more an aspiration than a reality, though a few hopeful examples are beginning to emerge.

While many still adhere to a traditional *kraštotyra* model that struggles to encompass the region's full diversity, there are hopeful signs of change. The evolution of established institutions like the Nalšia Museum, the emergence of new, community-based models like the Visaginas City Museum, and the difficult memory work being undertaken in places like Eišiškės, illustrate a gradual but vital shift. Crucially, this research notes the potential for collaborations with the dispersed archives of the region's Jewish, Polish and other diasporas. By digitally repatriating sources and engaging with the descendants of former inhabitants, local museums have the potential to become true "contact zones" –

vibrant spaces where global and local memory communities could start meeting, interacting, and negotiating the past together.

This transformation – from static repositories to dynamic, international contact zones for dialogue and co-creation – is essential if museums are to overcome their inherited silences and fulfill their potential as agents of social cohesion. By doing so, they can help foster an inclusive regional identity that is finally and fully grounded in the difficult, yet rich, multiplicity of its past.

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