

VilnaScribe

THE VILNA SHUL

Boston's Center
for Jewish Culture
18 Philips Street
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www.vilnashul.org

VILNA SHUL BOARD OF DIRECTORS ARTICULATES

At the most recent meeting of the Vilna Shul Board of Directors, a new, updated mission statement was adopted (see below). We are proud that our new mission statement articulates for the first time the plan to “perpetuate an enduring Jewish identity in Boston”. For the last fifteen years you have witnessed the steady transformation of this building from an abandoned, rundown shell, to a restoration project, to

a Jewish museum and community center. When the Vilna Center for Jewish Heritage was founded in 1995, our main goal was to preserve an old building. The board of directors dreamed of a place that would one day have watertight skylights, sturdy walls, and re-pointed brickwork. As we set to work making our dreams into reality we could not yet imagine what would one day fill this newly fortified space. Today, with the help of thousands of tourists who visit each year looking to learn about Boston’s Jewish Experience, hundreds of young people who pray here again, countless community partnerships and the support of you, we have now truly learned to dream.

With our mural restoration project finally underway, it is clear that we are achieving our goal of preserving the Vilna Shul. As you have observed over the past few years the Vilna Shul, Boston’s Center for Jewish Culture has also naturally found itself in

a position to perpetuate a Jewish identity in Boston. People visit this building for all different reasons; to learn about Judaism, to investigate family heritage, or to take a quiet moment in the historic sanctuary. Whatever your reason for coming to the Vilna Shul, we want to be sure that as we move forward the voices of our visitors, supporters and friends are taken into account. What does Jewish identity mean to you? What types of programs and events would you like to see happen at the Vilna Shul?

With all of the changes that are taking place at the Vilna Shul, as we restore our walls and revamp our mission, I would like to personally invite you to visit. Many of you remember when a parking lot seemed a more likely transformation for 18 Phillips Street than a museum and cultural center. Your stories and experiences with the Vilna Shul have become part of its enduring identity. If you have not been by the building in a few years, I think you will be quite pleased by the improved state in which you find us. This spring and summer we will have a number of opportunities for you to visit and bring your friends and family, whether for a special event or to stop by for a private tour, to help us foster awareness of this building and inspire historical, cultural and spiritual connections through it.

Sincerely yours,

Jack Swartz, President

*To **Preserve** the historic Vilna Shul and **Perpetuate** an enduring Jewish identity in Boston through education, community partnerships, exhibitions and the celebration of holiday and life-cycle events. We are dedicated to fostering awareness and inspiring historical, cultural and spiritual connections.*

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*How to be different and the same
as Boston's only Jewish historical site...*

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Steven M. Greenberg

Eight years ago I started wearing a yarmulke everyday, and it made me feel good. I had worn it during Shiva for my father, Joseph Greenberg, of blessed memory, and then again when I took my first and only trip to date to Eretz Yisrael. Wearing a yarmulke makes me proud of the heritage that I carry in my heart and in my soul. It also publicly identifies me as Jew. Once I started wearing a yarmulke, people began coming up to me and asking me questions about it: Am I a Rabbi? Am I orthodox? Even friends and family wanted to know if I had become more religious or changed in any way. I told them, I'm still the same guy, still active in the Conservative Jewish community, just as Jewish as I have always been all my life. I just choose to make my Judaism visible to the outside world in a different way. I choose to let people approach me and ask questions. I have learned how to live my life being different, and yet stay the same.

In some senses we at the Vilna Shul have made the same choice. We have decided to make Judaism visible and approachable to the outside world when they enter this building. The Vilna has been a Jewish building since its cornerstone was laid over 90 years ago. Like synagogues around the world, it can be recognized as a Jewish space from the outside. Stars of David decorate the building. A mezuzah is nailed to the doorpost. But, it was not until we unlocked the doors and posted a sign reading, "Museum is Open" that people began to approach us and ask questions. That is what sets the Vilna apart from other synagogues and other sites of old synagogues.

As it turns out, a lot of people have questions to ask about Judaism, but were waiting for a smiling guy in a yarmulke or a shul with an open door to show up in their lives. Now, I guess they have both.

So what does it mean to be the "everything you ever wanted to know about Judaism but didn't have a place to ask" place? It means you need to have a well-stocked Jewish library, some open-minded volunteers, and a good dose of self awareness or, perhaps, building awareness.

At the last conference of the Council of American Jewish Museums, the question often surfaced, "How Jewish should a Jewish museum be?" There are a lot of Jewish museums that are built as art museums, or community centers or children's museums. They have a lot of choices to make in the way they build their structure and the types of content they provide. Many of them struggle to strike a balance between being Jewish organizations and having no religious missions. We are lucky that the Vilna speaks for itself. It is undoubtedly a Jewish building with Jewish content. As Boston's only Jewish historic site, we think it is important to share this piece of Boston history with all who enter.

At the Vilna Shul we know what it is like to be different and yet the same. We are the lone Jewish historic site among many great historic sites and museums in Boston. We are among the few Jewish museums in the country devoted specifically to sharing Judaism, its culture and history. We are among a small number of synagogues in the world with open doors and a dedication to Jewish accessibility for all.

Just as wearing a yarmulke and being different has opened me up to conversations I would never have otherwise been a part of, so to the Vilna Shul is becoming part of unique and important conversations. Join our conversation. Bring a friend or a group of friends to the Vilna Shul. Join our email newsletter to better connect with us. Help us perpetuate an enduring Jewish identity in Boston.



Steven M. Greenberg, Executive Director

Do you have questions about Judaism you would like to explore?

Would you like to help find others interested in the same topic so a program can be developed? The Vilna Shul, in partnership with Rabbi Michael Joel of the Boston Jewish Connection, is trying a novel approach to Jewish learning. All you have to do is go to www.vilnashul.org, fill in the survey and if we can find five others who are interested in the same topic we can have a class here at the Vilna Shul.

hen I first learned of the Vilna Shul, I knew I had discovered a unique historical gem. Whenever I visit, I'm reminded of the great historical synagogues in different cities around the world—from Prague to Siena to Buenos Aires—but it wasn't until I began researching my own family history, that the Vilna Shul took on an entirely new significance.

I was raised in suburban Boston but my ties to the area began when my great grandfather emigrated to Boston from Melnitza, Ukraine (then Russia) more than 100 years ago. My great-grandfather, Kalman Kastel, arrived in Boston on May 29, 1907, disembarking from the steamship Otavia which had sailed from Liverpool, England. He had left my great-grandmother, Rose, and their son, Pincas (Philip), until he could send for them two years later; they arrived to the United States on July 27, 1909 on the SS Noordam (Holland-America Line). My great-grandmother had sailed, along with her son, from Rotterdam, and disembarked in New York. It is truly a wonder how my great-grandparents made their way from Melnitza to the steamships, and then to Boston. It is a testament to their insurmountable strength of purpose and resolve to emigrate to the "golden" land.

Kalman and Rose first lived in the West End with their growing family, which included my great-uncle Phil, my great-aunt Anne, and my beloved grandmother Betty (Anne and Betty were both born in Boston). My mother remembers hearing about Phillips Street but doesn't know if it is because our family lived there or possibly had another connection.

Kalman owned a creamery store on 34 Salem Street in the North End. We believe his store had been located under the former Southeast Expressway. A copy of Kalman's business card lists him as a dealer in wholesale and retail fancy creamery, butter, cheese, and eggs, strictly fresh. A branch store was at 1123 Blue Hill Avenue, Dorchester. Kalman and Rose also took boarders into the family home in the West End for additional income.

Within 10 years of their arrival to the United States, my great-grandparents purchased a single family home and moved to Glenarm Street in Dorchester. After Kalman passed away, my great-grandmother, a shrewd businesswoman, eventually built three, three-family homes on Callender Street in Dorchester. My grandparents—and eventually, my mother—lived in one of the homes and the others were rented. My great-grandmother became very involved with the Agudath Israel synagogue in Dorchester.

My grandmother and her siblings attended Boston Public Schools. They all married and raised their own families in the Boston area. My great-grandmother had also sent for her two brothers to come to the United States from the Ukraine. They settled in Framingham and Boston, and raised their families in the Boston area.

The West End and the community surrounding the Vilna Shul played an important part in creating a new life for my family in the United States. I am forever grateful to the community—thank you Vilna Shul! Andrea and her husband are volunteers at the Vilna Shul and with Havurah on the Hill.



Left: Mitzvah Day participants from Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston give the Vilna a spring cleaning.



Right: (left to right) Fine Art Conservator Gianfranco Pocobene, Conservation Technician Ellen Davis, and Architectural Conservator Brian Powell examine murals on the back wall of the Women's Gallery.



What are the first three words that come to mind when you hear the word Germany? This was the question posed to me by the head of the Cultural Affairs Department at the German Embassy in Washington DC as I proposed my plan to spend a year studying historic Jewish spaces in Germany. The German Chancellor Fellowship for Prospective Leaders is an opportunity made possible by the Alexander von Humboldt foundation to allow young professionals from the United States, Russia and China to carry out one year projects with German host organizations. The hope is that doing so will foster cooperation, understanding and mutual advancement across borders, languages and cultures. Three words could not begin to summarize the thoughts and ideas running through my head as I tried to explain to the ambassador why this project, why Germany.

After spending two years as a steward of the Vilna Shul, I have had a lot of time to think about and observe the role historic places play in our lives. For me, historic places contextualize history. They make tangible the passage of time and give us spaces in which to wonder and suppose about what was, what is, and what will be. In my work at the Vilna, I try to take into consideration how each visitor might interact differently with this very special place. As I have continued my efforts to make the Vilna a place for all to access the Boston Jewish experience, the importance of spending time learning from others who interpret Jewish historic places around the world has become evident. With a millennium of Jewish history that includes so much tragedy, but also so much innovation, renewal and achievement, the challenge of presenting and interpreting Jewish historic sites in Germany is certainly no easy task.

My proposed project for the German Chancellor Fellowship is to spend a year working and researching at the Stiftung Neue Synagoge - Centrum Judaicum in Berlin, Germany to draw parallels and strengthen relationships between German and American synagogue museums. In doing this I hope to improve my own understanding of the field of museum studies by gaining experience in German museums. I hope to better understand the interests and needs of diverse visitors to Jewish historic sites with the goal of making Jewish historic sites in Germany and America more approachable and accessible to all.

While I will be physically away from the Vilna Shul, my work will continue. For the next year, I hope you will visit my blog, follow me on twitter and friend me on facebook. I want to hear your comments, questions and ideas, as I share my observations in Germany. My experiences at the Vilna with many of you have fueled my curiosity in Jewish historic spaces and how people interact with them. It is my hope that this project will serve to link the Vilna Shul and the work being done here with the work being done in Germany in places like the Centrum Judaicum.



VILNA SHUL MURALS UPDATE

What do the Vilna Shul murals and a trip to the nail salon have in common? The answer: acetone. On Thursday, February 25th for the first time since 2002, active restoration work resumed at the Vilna Shul to explore and uncover traditional wall paintings in the historic sanctuary. At 7:00 in the morning Architectural Conservator Brian Powell and Fine Art Conservator Gianfranco Pocobene returned to the Vilna Shul with paper towels, drop cloths, special brushes, and several gallons of acetone. Acetone is a solvent that is soluble in water, which means the strength of the chemical can be adjusted to remove different thicknesses of paint.

Three layers of murals and designs were originally painted on the walls and ceilings throughout the Vilna Shul beginning in the 1920s. As styles and times changed, the murals were covered over with beige paint. When restoration work began on the Vilna Shul in the 1990s no one knew about the painted treasures that lay beneath the peeling beige paint. While doing some work on the building, Architectural Conservator Brian Powell noticed interesting ridges along the walls and first hypothesized that the building was once painted. His predictions were confirmed, and Fine Art Conservator Gianfranco Pocobene was brought aboard to work on the project. Now thanks to your votes in last spring's Partners in Preservation Program, the Vilna has been awarded \$90,800 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and American Express to give the back wall of the historic women's gallery the spa treatment... for historic murals that is.

We hope to reveal the three unique layers of murals one by one and then restore the original murals from the 1920s, in effect giving the building a face lift that is sure to take off about 80 years.

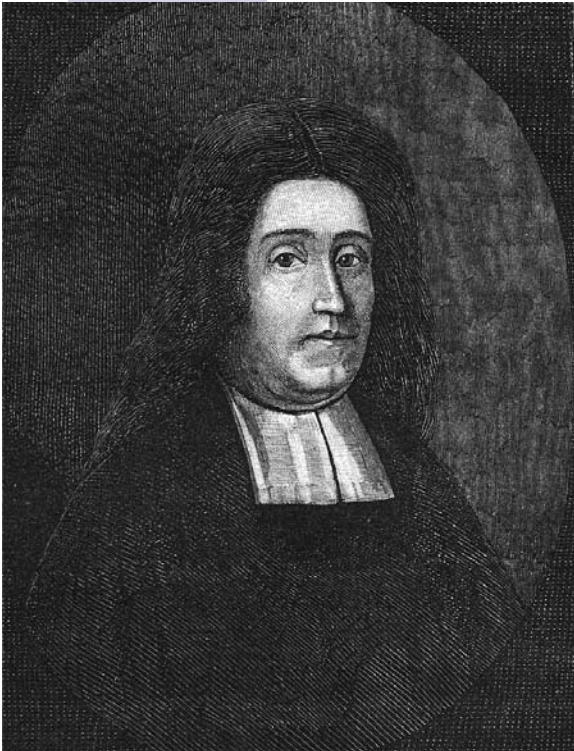
We are lucky to be working with a team as skilled as Brian and Gianfranco. Brian Powell has over 20 years of experience with the Boston Conservation Associates. He brings his expertise in historic paints and pigment identification as well as a special interest in exposure and conservation of painted decoration to this project. Brian's most notable projects include the Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey Capitol buildings, Mount Vernon, the Mark Twain House, the Old South Meeting House and the U.S. Treasury Department. Powell is an adjunct professor in the Preservation Program at Boston University, where he received his Masters in Preservation Studies.

Gianfranco Pocobene is the Head of Conservation at the Isabella Stewart Garden Museum. He started Gianfranco Pocobene Studio, Inc, a private practice specializing in conservation of easel paintings and murals in 1991. Some of his major projects include conservation and restoration of the John LaFarge murals and decorations in the tower of Trinity Church and John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion murals cycle at the Boston Public Library.

Visit the Vilna this spring during regular museum hours to watch the restoration process in action. The opportunity to watch as never before seen 20th century synagogue murals are revealed for the first time is a rare one! We want to share it with you!

Before the land making efforts of the 1800s, Boston was located on a small north-south peninsula called the Shawmut, connected to the main land by a narrow neck to its south. Those first Puritans to settle in Boston populated the eastern half of the peninsula around its harbor – the North End and the South End (now the Finance and Theater Districts; Boston Harbor was where Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market are now located). The West End remained farm lots into the 1700s.

Reverend William Blackstone arrived on the Shawmut peninsula in 1626 and settled on Beacon Hill's South Slope near the Common and the Charles River. As Blackstone was the only Englishman on the Shawmut peninsula, he was the de facto owner of the peninsula and the future Vilna property. When the first Massachusetts Puritans arrived in 1630, there were too many people on the peninsula for Blackstone, so he moved to Rhode Island.



Reverend James Allen

Newly formed Massachusetts towns granted town property to their first residents. The future Vilna property lies on the property line between two early farm lots with two sets of owners. Before leaving England in 1633, Reverend Joseph Glover was granted one of the farm lots. Glover left England for Boston with the colony's first printing press and two indentured printers; the beginning of what would become Harvard University Press. Glover died aboard ship en route to Boston. Two years later, his widow married Reverend Henry Dunster, Harvard College's first president; and a few years later she died, leaving her children and the Vilna farm lot in his care and ownership.

Boston's first social crisis has come to be known as the 1637 Antinomian Crisis. Antinomianism means "at odds with the law;" and for the Massachusetts Antinomians, that meant objecting to Massachusetts law. The Antinomians asserted that God spoke directly to them, that the leaders of the colony were not among the chosen, and that, therefore, the Massachusetts General Court had no authority to govern. That is sedition. Fearing an armed rebellion, the General Court disarmed the Antinomians, demanded that they recant, and banished those who did not.

Antinomian John Biggs was granted the second Vilna farm lot. Biggs recanted and lived a peaceful life in Boston and Braintree farming or leasing his farm lot.

Antinomians Anne Hutchinson and Reverend William Wheelwright were banished to Rhode Island and Exeter New Hampshire, respectively. After Hutchinson's husband died, she relocated to Manhattan Island. There she and most of her family were massacred by Natives. Only her daughter, Susannah, age 10, survived and was taken into captivity. After Boston relatives paid her ransom, Susannah returned to Boston where she and her husband, Thomas Cole briefly owned the former Glover lot. There is now a statue of Susannah with her mother Anne Hutchinson in front of the Massachusetts State House. Likewise, Reverend William Wheelwright's daughter returned to Boston, married Theodore Atkinson, and they briefly owned the same farm lot.

Reverend James Allen, pastor of Boston's First Church, purchased most of the West End farm lots in the 1690s including the two on which the Vilna sits. Allen also owned the future Rebecca Nourse Homestead in Danvers. Rebecca Nourse was one of the first to be executed as a witch in Salem in 1692. In 1692, Reverend Allen attended the synod in Cambridge that issued the "Cases of Conscience" position paper which brought the Salem Witch Trials to an end. (Reverend Allen's granddaughter married Salem witch trial judge Bartholomew Gedney. Gedney's step-granddaughter, Anne Fairfax, was George Washington's half-brother's wife.) When Reverend Allen died in 1710, his North Slope property was inherited by his son, Colonial Treasurer Jeremiah Allen, who surveyed in the North Slope streets and house lots in 1728.

In the next issue of the Scribe, I'll share a little about the Vilna property from 1728 to 1855 when the property had houses.

Havurah on the Hill

Havurah on the Hill continues to bring Boston's young adult Jewish community together once a month for lay-led non-denominational Friday night services and guest speakers.

In October, Havurah on the Hill held a sukkah building event. We built and decorated two New England style sukkahs, complete with strings of cranberries, on the front patio. At the monthly Friday night Shabbat service, young people from across Greater Boston gathered together to sing and celebrate in the sukkahs.

Havurah on the Hill partnered with a new Jewish Community Relations Council young adult social justice group to bring guest speaker Ron Bell, a local civic activist. Bell inspired HoH attendees with his story of starting Dunk the Vote to encourage people across Boston to do their civic duty and vote.

In December, Havurah on the Hill hosted Dr. Yoram Bilu, a professor visiting from Jerusalem. Dr. Bilu fascinated us with a discussion about the unusual spiritual and supernatural happenings within the Lubavitch community since the passing of their Rebbe.

In January, Havurah on the Hill hosted guest speaker and long time attendee, Dina Pomeranz. Dina talked about the work she does with the organization TAMTAM Africa, which distributes mosquito nets to parts of Africa at high risk for malaria.

In February, Havurah on the Hill featured Joanna Lipper, an author and filmmaker who is currently a Sheila Biddle Ford Foundation Fellow at the W.E.B Du Bois Institute at Harvard University. Joanna discussed how her family narrative, particularly through the tradition of naming Jewish people after deceased relatives, has contributed to her career path.

In March, local beer brewer Matthew Steinberg shared how he got interested in and learned his craft and about the upcoming brewery project he is working on.

We invite you to join Havurah on the Hill on April 23rd and May 14th. In April the guest speaker will be Nina Dudnik, co-founder and executive director of Seeding Labs, a philanthropic group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, working to share surplus supplies with scientists and medical practitioners in need around the world. On May 14th the guest speaker will be Gordon Zacks, an expert on the Middle East who authored *Defining Moments: Stories of Character, Courage, and Leadership*, a collection of essays on leadership. Zacks served in several capacities under George H. W. Bush.

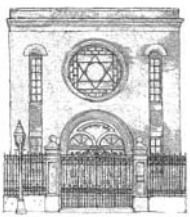
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