



THE SECRETS OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE OF VILNA

A DOCUMENTARY BY LOIČ SALFATI (2023, 1h40)

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LOOKING FOR CO-PRODUCTION

In the heart of Vilnius, capital city of Lithuania, an international team of archaeologists attempts to uncover the site of what was once The Great Synagogue, damaged by the Nazis in WWII, destroyed completely by the Soviet authorities in the 1950s. As a result of an ecclesiastical rule dating back to the sixteenth century forbidding synagogues from exceeding the height of the local churches, the Great Synagogue foundations were built six feet below ground. In doing so, the underground part, like an invisible time capsule, actually preserved the remains of this renowned synagogue building for later discovery. For nearly a century the secrets of The Great Synagogue and what was once a thriving Jewish community in Vilnius lay buried beneath the ground. Over the course of multiple excavation campaigns as documented in this film, The Great Synagogue, its prominent history and hidden treasures are slowly unearthed, bringing a long forgotten story back to life.

Comprising many interviews in Lithuania, the United States, Israel and France, the film tells the story of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius. It constantly travels back and forth in time, thanks to iconographic research work and 3D modelling, and follows the 2019 and 2021 excavation campaigns day by day.

Both an archaeological adventure and an historical investigation, The secrets of the Great Synagogue of Vilna highlights the Lithuanian Jewish community intellectual effervescence and the reputation of Vilnius, regarded as one of the most important Jewish cultural centres in Eastern Europe. Vilna, Wilno, Vilnius, the town was renamed many times throughout its turbulent history, to

officially become Vilnius after the end of World War II. Nonetheless, in the collective unconscious, the Great Synagogue remains tied to the name of Vilna.

Multicultural and multi-confessional Vilna is renowned as the mystical city of a hundred churches and a hundred sixty synagogues. When Napoleon first arrived in Vilna in 1812, he compared the city to Jerusalem, which earned it the nickname of “the Jerusalem of the North”.

In modern Vilnius only one synagogue still exists today, in testimony of the past. Vilnius Old Town has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1994.



Where did the idea for the project come from?

I've been living in Vilnius and fascinated by this town for more than twenty years, especially its ancient Jewish neighbourhood, of which only a few traces are left today. In 2018, I happened to witness the end of an excavation campaign, which had begun three weeks earlier. The site was already almost completely backfilled, but I was enthralled by the remains of a tile, brushing up against tree roots. The magic of this suspended moment gave birth to the desire to make a documentary on the history of the Great Synagogue of Vilnius.

What narrative viewpoint did you choose?

Thinking about it again today, I wonder how I could tell the story of a destroyed, long-forgotten building, located in a little-known country. I had to start from scratch and bring elements of understanding on Lithuania, Vilnius, the Jewish neighborhood, to better grasp the role of the Great Synagogue for the Jewish community and apprehend the building in all its complexity. The challenge was to make this story accessible to a public which, like me, does not possess an in-depth knowledge of the Jewish culture and has never set foot in a synagogue. While keeping in mind that some people are still even unable to find Vilnius on a map!

To put all the pieces together without getting lost, I made the decision to tell this story in a first-person narrative. Indeed, this film does not only retrace the history of the

Great Synagogue, but also a four-year personal journey. The trips, encounters and discoveries I made bring colour to, and above all humanize the story..

You placed great emphasis on the images and the soundtrack ...

Making a place that does not exist anymore speak is arduous, if not impossible. We often have a romantic vision of archaeology. In practice, it is very far from romantic: we're talking hours and hours of digging, turning over the soil and bricks, and when we do discover objects, they do not immediately make sense to us. I could not make a two-hour film focusing solely on the archaeologists' work process. So, we had to recreate a visual environment around the excavations, in particular with 3D images. It required a huge amount of work - searching for period photographs and plans. I also asked a Lithuanian artist to create illustrations based on existing photographs and to draw also, appealing to her imagination, the parts of the building we cannot see on the old pictures. About the soundtrack, it is an integral part of the project thanks to the enchanting music of French composer Pierre Thilloy, American cantor Rita Glass and Vilnius Yiddish singer Marija Kruopoves..

INTERVIEW WITH FILM DIRECTOR LOÏC SALFATI



Photographer and film director, Loïc Salfati has been working in the cultural sector since 2002. He is currently deputy director and cultural attaché at the French Institute in Lithuania.

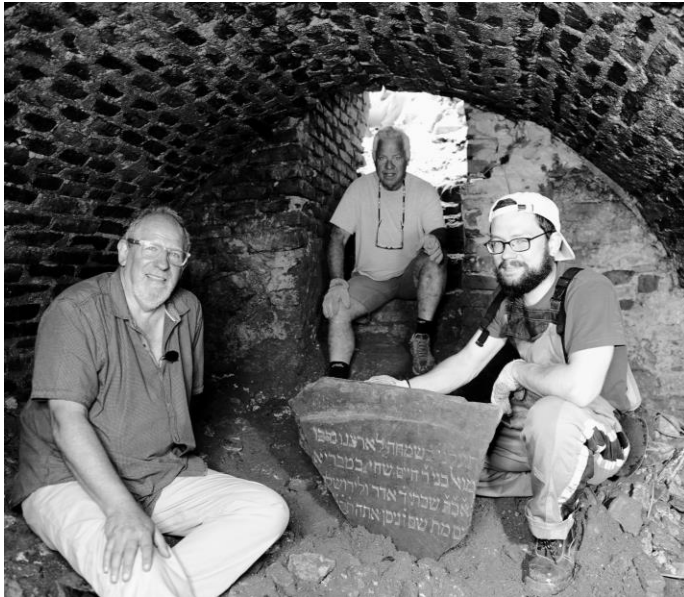


Illustration Lena

INTERVIEW WITH ARCHAEOLOGIST JON SELIGMAN IN CHARGE OF THE EXCAVATIONS



Jon Seligman is an archaeologist. Director of the Excavations, Surveys and Research Department of the Israel Antiquities Authority.



What makes the excavations at the Great Synagogue in Vilnius unique?

While the architecture of the main elements of the Great Synagogue of Vilna are known from plans, photographs and first hand reports prior to its destruction in WWII, only exposure of its remains takes the monuments from memory to the tangible. The excavation has provided us with first hand knowledge of new aspects of the Great Synagogue, including the Bimah, the decoration of the structure, the miqva'ot (ritual baths) and now provides a tool to re-establish the presence of a building that was once the cathedral of the Jewish community of Vilnius who formed a third of the city's population before their annihilation between 1941 to 1944.

Why is this film important?

Vilnius has an empty heart at its core. A visitor to the city today cannot appreciate how important the city was as a centre of Jewish life, culture and living, with the Great Synagogue as its emblematic symbol. Loïc Salfati's film is a fantastic opportunity to present to the general public how an archaeological excavation can help reintroduce this edifice to Lithuania as monument that defines Vilnius in its multi-cultural glory that defined its history over half a millennium. With great sensitivity, the film goes beyond the physicality of a building, to show what the Great Synagogue means to those who cherish the memory of the Jewish community of Vilnius..



Under the guise of an investigation on archaeological excavations, Loïc Salfati, multiplying perspectives, succeeds in drawing a picture of the Litvak civilization of which the Great Synagogue was once the centre. A civilization wiped out by the Shoah and the memory erasure imposed by the Soviets, and that this movie brings back to life. A fascinating and meaningful film with an often-shattering impact.

Florent Georgesco, *Le Monde des Livres*, Paris





THE SPEAKERS

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YIVO, NY

Raphaëlle Laufer

HISTORIAN
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Institut français de Lituanie | Ambassade de France en Lituanie
Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History
National museum of Lithuania
Wroblewskis Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences
Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas
Lithuanian jewish community
David Labkovski project
Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archives, United States Holocaust
Memorial Museum
University of Hartford | Christopher Newport University

FILM SPECIFICATIONS

Original version in English and French
Subtitled versions
French / English / Lithuanian / Hebrew
Running time long version: 1h40

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