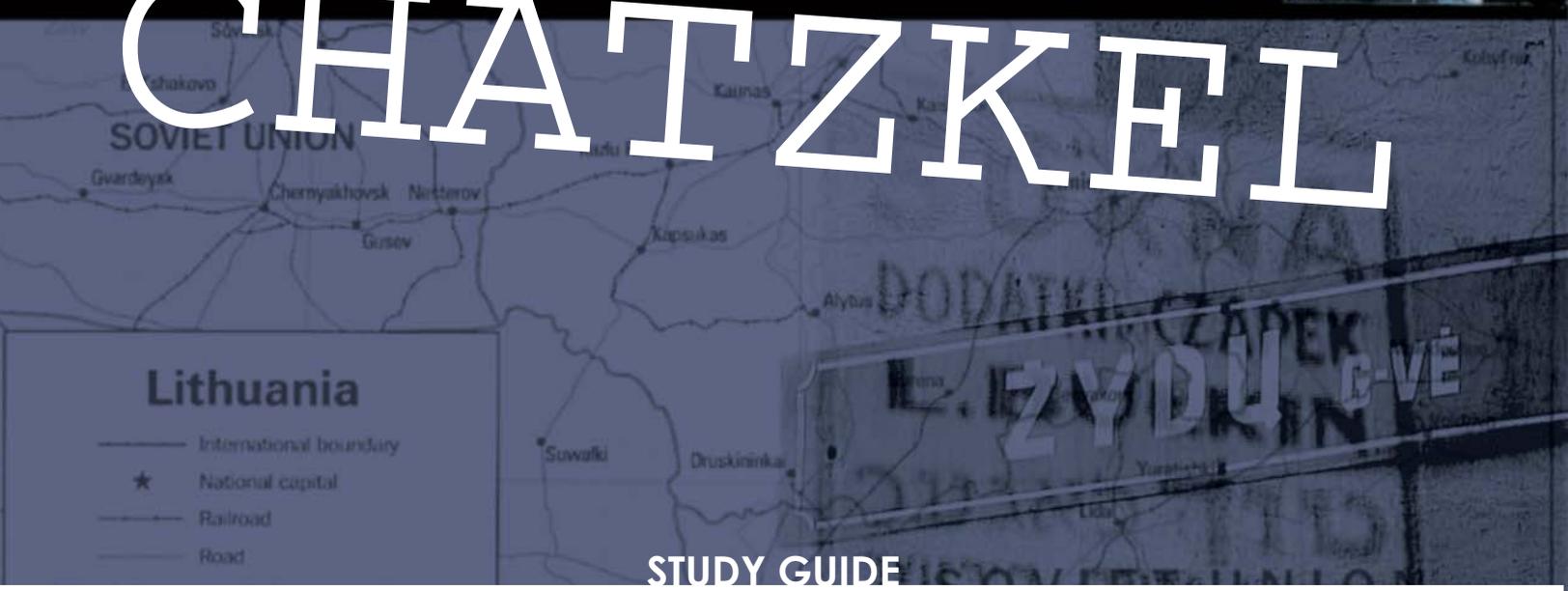
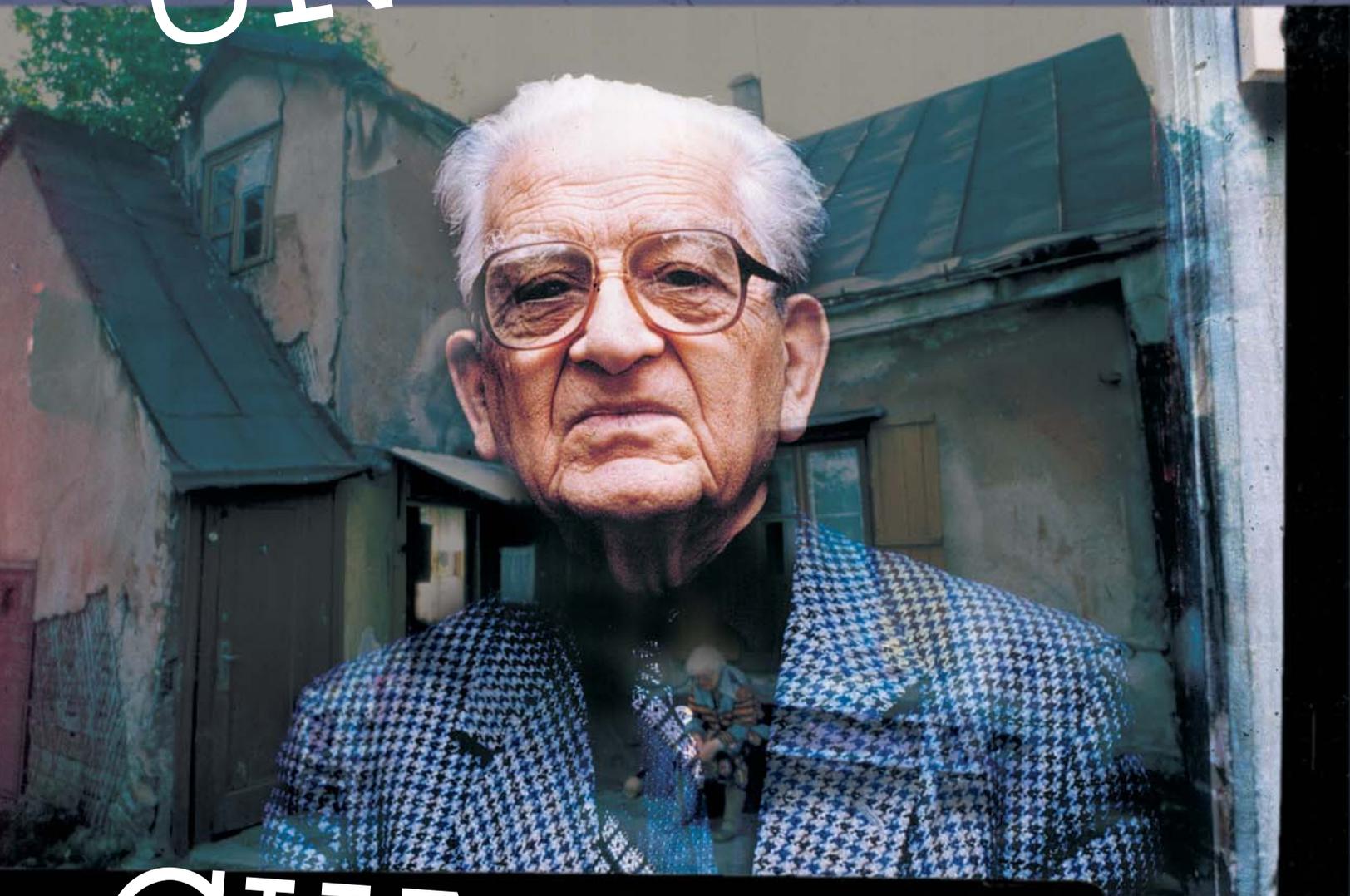




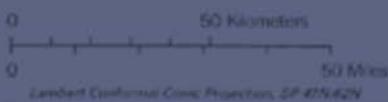
# UNCLE



# CHATZKEI

## Lithuania

- International boundary
- ★ National capital
- Railroad
- Road



STUDY GUIDE

MANNY KINGSLEY AND LIBBY TUDBALL

## INTRODUCTION

*Uncle Chatzkel* explores the life story of a remarkable man, and his reunion with his nephew Rod, a South African born Australian living with his extended family in Sydney. Rod is both the filmmaker and Chatzkel's nephew.

Chatzkel Lemchen has lived through the Russian Revolution, two World Wars, a Communist regime, and the transition of Lithuania from Soviet Republic to an independent state. During the Holocaust, Chatzkel's parents and children were killed by Nazis and their Lithuanian supporters. He and his wife Lena were then sent to separate concentration camps in Germany. Unlike many other Jews who were not Communists, Chatzkel and his wife, both Holocaust survivors, chose to remain in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, despite the loss of their children and other members of their families. Following the death of his wife in 1979, Chatzkel was left in Europe without any close family.

Chatzkel survived the Holocaust through his skills as a linguist and lexicographer. His dictionaries helped preserve the Lithuanian language during the Soviet era. Still working at the age of ninety-three, he is now regarded as a national treasure.

In spite of Chatzkel's success, he is a lonely man. One of seven siblings, Chatzkel was the only member of his family to remain in Lithuania. In the film, members of his Australian family meet their uncle in his home. Together, they explore their family's roots and historical experiences that had a profound impact on millions of others as well.

The film explores the history of Europe's Lithuanian Jewish community. We are confronted with the ghosts of previously vibrant communities whose roots stretched back over 700 years, but who were devastated by genocidal policies during the Nazi domination of the area. The film is more than the reunion of Uncle Chatzkel and his extended Australian family. It uses the backdrop of history to explain how the events that shaped European society directly impacted on his family's destiny.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

*Uncle Chatzkel* will have interest and relevance for students from middle to senior secondary levels studying His-

tory, Jewish Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, Politics and Media Studies.

## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

**Yiddish** is the German-Hebrew language spoken by most of Eastern Europe's Jewish population. It emerged from the Rhineland border area of Franco-Germany, where medieval Jewish Talmudic civilization developed prior to and during the early Crusader period in Europe. In the later Crusader period, Jews moved from the Rhineland eastwards to Prussia, Poland, South Central Europe, the Baltic area and eventually into Russia, taking their language with them.

- How can language help to reinforce and preserve cultural traditions?

The term **Litvak** (a Lithuanian Jew) primarily refers to Jews from Lithuania. It also exemplifies the archetypal independent thinker, for whom the search for knowledge justifies existence. The Litvak is a pragmatist and a humanist. For modern Jews, knowledge can offer entry to realms that might otherwise be closed to them as Jews. Even in the 20th Century, Jews are often seen as a separate – even alien – cultural, religious and social entity. In the last two hundred and fifty years, Lithuania has been the intellectual home of many nationalist activists and great religious and secular

top **LEMCHEN FAMILY**  
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE LEMCHEN  
FAMILY TAKEN IN 1913. CHATZKEL  
IS IN THE BACK ROW, SECOND  
FROM LEFT.

bottom **FAMILY OF FOUR**  
CHATZKEL WITH HIS WIFE LENA  
AND THEIR TWO CHILDREN, BOTH  
KILLED IN THE HOLOCAUST



Jewish scholars, men and women who have shaped Jewish life, not only in Europe, but also throughout the Jewish world.

- Find out more about Lithuania using your atlas, library resources and by visiting <http://neris.mii.lt/>
- To specifically learn more about the Lithuanian language, go to <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~kkarins/lithuania.html>
- To find out more about Rabbinic Learning, Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature visit <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~telsegal/TalmudPage.html> and <http://www.jewishgen.org.litvak/vitalija.htm>
- How does what you have read help you to understand why Lithuanian Jews valued education?

**Chatzkel** is the Yiddish diminutive of Ezekiel, the fiery Promethean prophet of the Old Testament. Traditionally, European Jews gave their children names of Biblical figures or famous religious personalities, hoping that the spirit of these famous souls would invest and influence their namesakes. Ezekiel, the prophet, was a junior priest in the last days of the first Commonwealth. He unsuccessfully tried to invoke Israel to repent and thus avert the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the end

of the First Commonwealth, which took place in 586 B.C.

Chatzkel Lemchen was born in Lithuania, and has spent a great part of his life recording and preserving his nation's words and language. Lithuania is one of three Baltic countries on the eastern shore of the Baltic sea. In modern Jewish history, Lithuania stands out as a beacon of Rabbinic Learning, Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, and forward social and national thinking. Many traditional Jews entered the world of Western technical and tertiary skills and professions, from which they had previously been barred by specific legislation.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In pre-Revolutionary Russia, large numbers of young Jews had abandoned religious education and values, transferring their intellectual commitment to the society beyond the then 'crumbling' ghetto walls. The film shows us the passion many young Lithuanian Jews felt for the emerging society, and their involvement in the task of building the new democracy. Yet the dream dissolved in the mid-1930s with the rise of Fascism in Lithuania, as elsewhere in Europe, and the later outbreak of the Second World War.

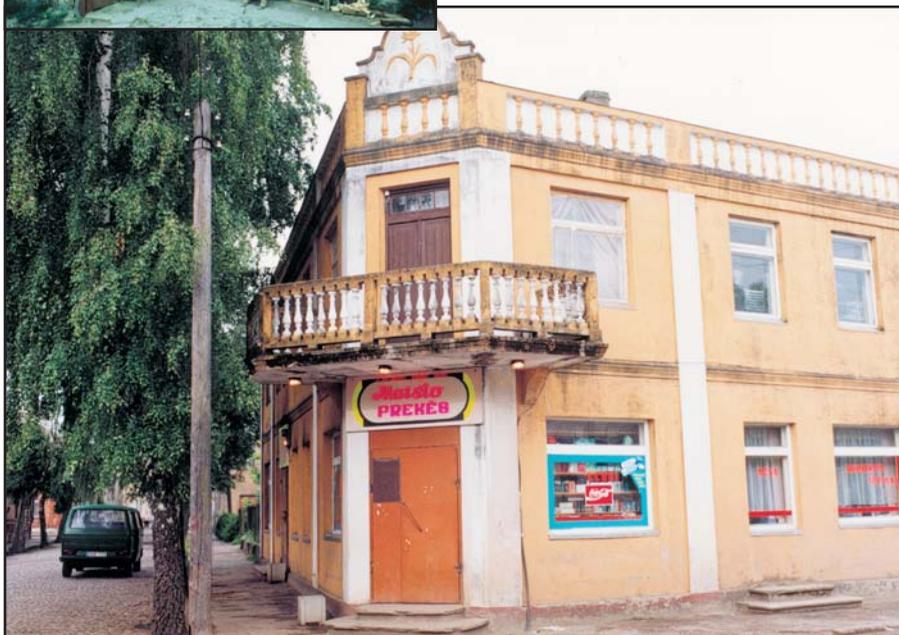
During the Second World War, Jews were brutally forced into ghettos in areas where they had previously coexisted (albeit with some often religiously inspired tensions) with their neighbours for centuries. This isolation and relegation to pariah status, coupled with the genocidal desires of many in the ultra-nationalist camp to effect their extermination, led the writer George Steiner to chillingly note, 'Somewhere the determination to kill Jews, to harass them from the earth simply because they are, is always alive'.

George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, Penguin, 1969, p.119.

Through the eyes of Chatzkel, we witness the transformation of embryonic Lithuanian democracy to ultra-nationalism during the 1930s and 1940s, and the impact that these changes had on long established communities. In the 1990s, other parts of Europe also witnessed the 'ethnic cleansing of minorities', in scenes similar to those experienced by Jews fifty years earlier.

top **THE KOVNO GHETTO**  
HOUSE WHERE CHATZKEL AND HIS FAMILY WERE FORCED TO LIVE.

bottom THE BALCONY FROM WHICH AN OFFICER ADDRESSED A CROWD OF JEWS GATHERED IN THE SQUARE. WHEN HE WHISTLED, LOCAL COLLABORATORS OPENED FIRE.



- What impact did the new nationalist movements have on the Jewish communities?
- Where has 'ethnic cleansing' occurred in the 1990s and more recently?
- In what ways did Chatzkel suffer in World War I?
- Suggest reasons why the journey from Russia back to Lithuania was so difficult for Chatzkel.

## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

### LOOKING AT THE START OF THE FILM

- How do we know that Rod values his Jewish heritage and culture?
- Why do you think that relatives of the older generation and of Rod's generation had not been in contact with Uncle Chatzkel before?
- How did Rod renew the contact?
- What images and scenes does Rod use to give us insights into his family's background and cultural roots?
- How would you describe the first meeting between Rod and his uncle?
- Why does Chatzkel say that he is 'a man completely without family'?
- Why was Chatzkel so oblivious to the crisis and war around him? Jews were, by necessity, always sensitive to political nuances, especially in areas where there had been tension. Could his relationship with Jonas Jablonskis have blinded or alienated him from the reality of the situation?
- Millions of Jews were killed between 1939 and 1941. Why was the fact that Chatzkel was a student of Jablonskis so crucial to his survival?

Chatzkel and his family were interred in the Kovno ghetto. His children were rounded up and exterminated in a *kinderaktion*. He and his wife were later deported to camps in Germany as the Soviet army approached Kovno. The Nazis wanted none of their victims to survive.

### UNCLE CHATZKEL'S STORY

In the film, we gain insights into Uncle Chatzkel's life. The film shows the pride that Chatzkel has in his many and wide-ranging scientific achievements. These can be seen as part of his enduring Litvak qualities of gentility, honesty and intellectual purity, embracing the scholarship that Jewish Lithuania had previously been famous for.

- Where was Chatzkel born and where did he live his early life?
- Why do you think other members of Chatzkel's family left Lithuania?
- Why do you think Chatzkel stayed?
- In small groups, develop a timeline of key events in Chatzkel's life, first from what you learn in the film, and then with the help of historical sources.

- What insights does Chatzkel give into life in the concentration camps?

below ZYDU OR 'JEWS' STREET  
IN THE OLD JEWISH QUARTER OF  
VILNIUS



below WRITER/DIRECTOR ROD FREEDMAN WITH HIS UNCLE CHATZKEL DURING THE MAKING OF THE FILM, WHICH WAS A VERY PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR BOTH MEN



- How was Chatzkel able to survive both the emotional and physical trauma of the Holocaust and World War 2?
- Chatzkel says, 'I lived because I was able to apply my intellectual knowledge'. Which of Uncle Chatzkel's unique skills and knowledge helped him to survive the Holocaust?

The afterthought that Chatzkel could have saved his family if he had escaped before the Holocaust is left floating in the air.

- What reasons can you suggest to explain why Chatzkel did not leave as so many others did?
- What was the impact of the Holocaust on Chatzkel's post-war thinking? Did he stay in Eastern Europe to be close to the graves of his loved ones?
- Most of the younger Holocaust survivors, especially those with a strong sense of Jewish identity, left for the West. This is particularly true of those who weren't Communists. Why did Chatzkel distance himself from the Communists, given that they were a major factor in the destruction of Fascism, which had had such a devastating impact on him personally?

Was Chatzkel ultimately a Lithuanian nationalist?

- What was life like for Chatzkel and his wife Lena after the war?
- What made it easier for him to live under a Communist regime?

Strangely, for a man who lost his immediate family and the world he grew up in, the film seems to make the point that he made little effort to connect with his extended family until they approached him, in search of their lost past and pre-war European Jewish roots.

- How can you explain this?

Chatzkel was recognized by the Lithuanian State for his publications and contributions to national culture. However, he published only one book on Yiddish philology and he only returns to Yiddish, 'his mother tongue', towards the end of the film. This leaves the question of his Jewish identity ambiguous.

- What explanations can you suggest for his focus on Lithuanian language?
- Did World War 2 rob Chatzkel of his past, or was he, like many others, searching for a new world where he was accepted and had a recognized place?
- Record and then discuss with your class what you see as his achievements.
- His colleagues say he is a man who combines 'kindness and intellectuality'. What does this mean?
- Chatzkel's colleagues in Vilnius regard Chatzkel as a 'bridge between Russian, Jewish and Yiddish .... He unites these cultures'. How has Chatzkel been able to achieve these links?
- 'Uncle Chatzkel was a true perfectionist'. Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.

## THE HOLOCAUST

The film teaches us about the horrifying impact of the Holocaust on Jewish

people. In Lithuania alone, 94% of the country's 240,000 Jewish people were killed.

- Why did Hitler and the Nazis develop their anti-Semitic policies?
- What impact did the Holocaust have on Chatzkel's family?
- Why is Yom Kippur in 1941 remembered by Jewish people?
- What does Freedman's representation of Kovno as a town under Nazi terror add to our understanding of history? How does this representation help us to confront the human trauma and horror that was part of everyday life for millions living under political terror?
- Find out more about the devastating effects of the Holocaust on Jewish people.
- Watch the film or read the book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, to develop your understanding of the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish families. Visit Anne Frank's house on the Internet at <http://www.annefrank.nl/eng/default2.html>
- Visit Jewish Museums in your state. You could begin with a virtual excursion to the Jewish Museum and Research centre, Melbourne, Australia at <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/affiliates/hlc/pages/facts.htm> Also visit <http://www.yadvashem.org.il/> and follow the links from there to other museums.

### MEDIA STUDIES

The film is written, directed, and co-produced by Uncle Chatzkel's nephew, Rod Freedman.

- Why do you think he decided to make the film?
- What impact has the making of this film had on Uncle Chatzkel's life and on Rod's life?
- Family is clearly important to the Freedmans. What has this film done for the family? How does Freedman show this?

- Who do you think has gained more from the film, the Freedmans or Chatzkel?
- In what ways do the personal connections between Rod, Chatzkel and other family members enrich the film?
- How would you describe the genre of the film?
- What techniques has the film-maker used to set the historical context?
- How are scenes and shots selected in order to create a timeline and sense of the past as Chatzkel tells his story?
- While the film is primarily the story of one individual, it also becomes an important historical document. Do you agree? How is this achieved?
- There are many moving scenes and moments in the film. When Rod visits the place where so many Jews were killed, filming in an area that once was alive with Jewish families and culture, he says, 'In this landscape of memories, I feel I am searching for the invisible'. In your own words, explain what Rod means.

### MUSIC

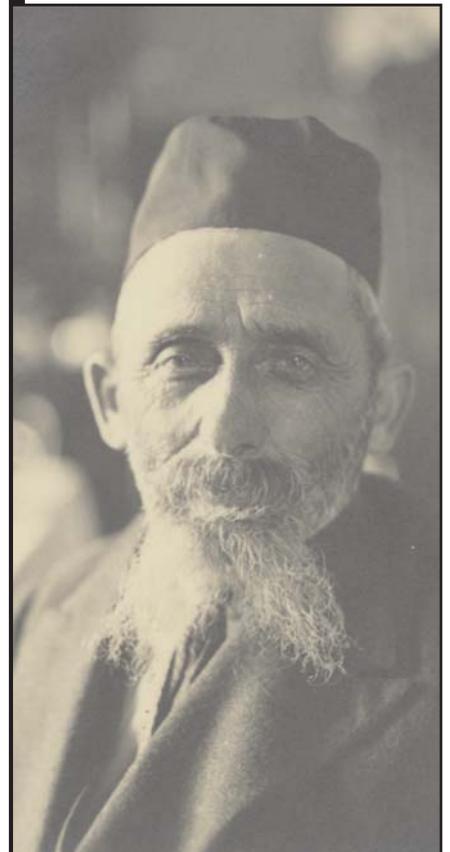
There is a haunting quality to the film that has been enhanced by the music, which is partly liturgical, and also partly a remnant of the rich pre-war Yiddish music tradition that post-Holocaust Yiddish speakers have fought to save. Composer Guy Cross won an AFI Award for the score.

- What impact do you think the background music has in the film?
- What kinds of music are chosen and why?
- Choose some specific scenes in the film and discuss the choice of music and the effect it has on the scene and your reactions to it.

### THE END OF THE FILM

In January 1991, Lithuania became an independent nation once again,

below **CHATZKEL'S FATHER**, AVRAHAM YAAKOV LEMCHEN. HE, ALONG WITH MANY OF HIS FELLOW JEWISH CITIZENS, WAS KILLED BY THE NAZIS AND THEIR LITHUANIAN SUPPORTERS.



through an uprising that led to the breakaway from the Soviet Union. We learn that since independence, there is now a revival of Jewish culture, and schools have opened again where young people can learn their heritage.

- What evidence does the film provide of this happening?
- Explain the phrase: 'The Iron Curtain was lifted'.

At the end of the film, a particularly poignant scene shows us a Polish priest who has only recently discovered his Jewish origins. He was saved from genocide when his parents sent him away, and he grew up as a Christian, probably following the extermination of his parents. In the film, he sits in the synagogue in Vilnius, contemplating the past and the future. His confusion and frustration are evident.

- How do you think the Polish priest would have felt about his dilemma?
- Which factors do you think have the greatest influence on you: your family's cultural origins, or your experiences during childhood and adult life?

We are left to ponder whether Chatzkel saw himself as part of Jewish tradition or not. Evidently, for Rod, his uncle represents something very special, a link with the lost past. He is part of the physical chain that was not destroyed, but preserved like a museum piece. People in the film from Vilnius describe him in those terms. There is no longer a strong living Torah presence in Lithuania, and past values are only carried on by a small number of elderly men. The new Jewish school is only a token of what previously existed.

- Do you think Chatzkel sees himself as part of Jewish tradition?
- What might happen to Jewish culture and traditions in the future in Lithuania?
- What happens to Uncle Chatzkel after Rod and the film crew have departed?

- How do you think Chatzkel would have felt about the development of the relationship with his grand-niece, Sylvia?
- Rod makes the comment, 'I realise now what we almost lost by not looking back'. What does he mean?
- At the close of the film, Chatzkel says, 'I have lived my life reasonably well and as it should be'. What do you think he means?

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Producers: Rod Freedman

Executive Producer, Robe Productions: Brian Sherman

Executive Producer: Franco di Chiera

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