

Two attempts at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in interwar Kaunas: goals, founders and activities

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ABSTRACT. After Lithuania restored its independence in 1918, its Jewish citizens actively contributed to the growth of the country in different fields, had a significant influence on the development of Lithuanian culture, science and art, while also establishing their own cultural and educational institutions and artistic groups. Among the still unexplored topics related to the phenomena of interwar culture and art that were shaped by the multicultural environment in Lithuania at the time is the topic of the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas, the provisional capital of interwar Lithuania. Two attempts were made to establish the Studio – in 1926 and in 1938. Despite the fact that both times its activities were short-lived, its contribution to Kaunas' musical life and to the musical education of the city's Jewish community is rather significant. The purpose of this article is to present both attempts at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas, and its goals, founders and activities. The research was based on archival material, articles from the interwar press and the memories of contemporaries.

KEYWORDS:

Jewish Opera Studio,
Kaunas, musical
education, interwar,
Izaokas Vildmanas-
Zaidmanas,
Mendel Sudarsky.

Introduction

The first Jews in the trading city of Kaunas are mentioned in the 15th century. From the second half of the 17th century Jews settled in Vilijampolė (known to Jews as Slabodka) near Kaunas, on the other side of the Neris River, where they engaged in various crafts. A community gradually formed in Kaunas as well. In 1843, Kaunas became the centre of the Kaunas Governorate in the Russian Empire. In the second half of the 19th century, Jews made up more than half the population of Kaunas. The city expanded, the number of synagogues, prayer houses and Jewish educational institutions grew. The yeshiva of Slabodka, founded in 1882, eventually became famous all over the world.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the number of social, political, cultural and charitable Jewish organisations, societies of music and theatre, science and health pro-

tection increased in Kaunas. Various cultural activities, performances by Jewish theatre troupes and concerts took place in the Volkhaus (the People's House), a building of impressive eclectic architecture. The long-term activity of Gabriel Lan (1874–1941?), the entrepreneur of the Kaunas City Theatre and owner of a printing house, is noteworthy in organising tours of the most famous artists of the time (such as Mattia Battistini, Feodor Chaliapin, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Anna Pavlova and others), as well as opera, operetta and drama troupes (E. V. 1934: 9). In 1907, the Jewish Music, Drama and Singing Society officially started its activities in the city, performing the songs and operettas of Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), the founder of the Yiddish theatre. Within a few years, the society grew to several hundred members, and some of them split off and formed an orchestra (Pukelytė 2017: 41).

World War I and the forced eviction of Jews from the Kaunas Governorate by the tsarist authorities, who had accused Jews collectively of collaborating with Germany, interrupted these intensive processes of cultural development. However, according to historian Solomonas Atamukas, Jewish culture was revived very quickly after the war (Atamukas 2001: 148), when most of the Jews returned. After the restoration of the independent state of Lithuania in 1918, Jews actively participated in city governments, fought for the consolidation of independence in the ranks of mobilised and volunteer soldiers and contributed to the development of Lithuania's well-being in various fields. As the Vilnius-born Yiddish writer, journalist and translator, and active promoter of cultural coexistence Uriah Kacenenbogen (1885–1980) wrote in the daily *Lietuva* (Lithuania) newspaper in 1921:

I have entered my native land. Lithuania has risen, and we, Lithuanian Jews, have found our homeland in it. [...] We, the Jews, will also join its builders. We will take the heavier stone on our shoulders for its revival. The happiness that falls to us to build our homeland will make Lithuania a more real shelter for us. Lithuania is a country-altar that demands sacrifices, and one cannot stop at its steps to rest (Kacenenbogenas 1921).

After Vilnius was captured by the Bolsheviks in early 1919, and a few months later by the Poles, Kaunas de facto became the provisional capital of Lithuania; within two decades it grew from a provincial town to a metropolis, also due to the significant input of Jewish citizens into its economy, science, flourishing of modern architecture, educational and cultural institutions. Professional Jewish musicians played in the State Theatre and other orchestras, chamber ensembles, were opera soloists, well-known popular music performers in restaurants and cafes, and were intensively engaged in pedagogical work at the State Music School (which became a conservatory in 1933).

The development of the Lithuanian Jewish community itself was stimulated by national autonomy, which was granted to Lithuanian Jews in cultural, religious, social, educational and other matters from 1919 and was a unique phenomenon in the history of ethnic minority rights. Although this autonomy, supported by the Ministry of Jewish Affairs and local councils, existed only until 1926, it nevertheless facilitated the rapid development of culture and education of the Jewish community (Pukelytė 2015: 79–80), including intense growth in the number of Jewish organisations, secondary schools teaching in the Yiddish and Hebrew languages, Jewish daily and weekly newspapers, and the creation of Jewish theatre troupes. In 1924–1939, there were between two to four Jewish theatres in Kaunas (*ibid.*: 80). Even though Jewish troupes in Kaunas suffered from a constant lack of financial support, be it from the local Jewish community or the state (*ibid.*: 81), one must admit that, according to the historian Saulius Sužiedėlis, during its two decades of existence, the Lithuanian state funded Jewish education and continued to modestly subsidise Jewish religious and cultural life, sometimes to the annoyance of non-Jews. Sužiedėlis provides the example of the Ministry of Education's support for Jewish theatre and choral music reported in the article "6000 Litas for Jewish Art", published in the newspaper *Verslas* (Enterprise) on July 14, 1932 (Sužiedėlis 2025: 88).

Among the still unexplored topics related to the phenomena of interwar culture and art, which were shaped by the multicultural environment of Lithuania at the time, is the Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio, of which two attempts at its establishment were made – in 1926 and in 1938. Theatre researcher Ina Pukelytė has mentioned the second attempt in her monograph "Žydų teatras tarpukario Lietuvoje" (Jewish theatre in Lithuania during the interwar period) (Pukelytė 2017); however, no research on the first attempt has been conducted. Despite the fact that both times the activities of the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas were short-lived, its contribution to Kaunas' musical life and to the musical education of the city's Jewish community is rather significant. The purpose of this article is to present both attempts at the establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas, its goals, founders and activities.

The first attempt at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas in 1926

The first attempt at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas was initiated by the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society, which was headed by known intellectual, ophthalmologist and humanist Dr. Mendel Sudarsky (1885–1951) and was registered at his home address of 3 Ožėškienės Street in Kaunas. Born in the small town of Vištytis

in southwestern Lithuania, Sudarsky studied in Berlin and several other universities in Germany and became a well-known eye surgeon. Sudarsky returned to Lithuania in 1920 where he became one of the most active leaders of Jewish community life, while continuing to practice his profession (Dr. Mendel Sudarsky... 1952).¹ On September 2, 1926, as per the initiative of Sudarsky and his wife Alte, the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society submitted a request to the Minister of Education for permission to open a Jewish Opera Studio under the Society (Illustration 1).

This initiative may have been encouraged by the fact that a Jewish musical education institution was already operating in Vilnius – in 1924, the Jewish Music Institute (Yidisher muzikalisher institut) was founded by the Jewish Society for Support of the Arts, with Yiddish as the main language of instruction. Modelled after the common program of Polish conservatories, the institute, headed by pianist Rafał Rubinsztein (1895–1982), had departments of piano, string instruments, wind instruments, singing and opera, taught by the best music pedagogues in Vilnius of that time, including non-Jews. Members of the teaching staff and their pupils appeared in public concerts where they used to perform European classical music, as well as works by Polish, Russian and Jewish composers. The Institute also had its own orchestra and opera studio and staged several classical operas in Yiddish. It operated until 1940.

In his request to open a Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas, Sudarsky stated that Lithuanian Jewish violinist, pedagogue and conductor Izaokas Vildmanas-Zaidmanas² (1885–1941) had been appointed as the head of the studio. The residential address of Vildmanas-Zaidmanas at the time – 15 Ukmergės Road³ in Kaunas – was provided as the address of the Jewish Opera Studio. Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, who came from the small town of Dotnuva in central Lithuania, contributed significantly to the musical development of interwar Lithuania. In 1926, when the Jewish Opera Studio was initiated, he was at the peak of his career: he was the concertmaster of the State Opera orchestra, played first violin in the string quartet he founded in 1920, taught at the Kaunas State Music School and led its symphony orchestra. In addition to his performing and pedagogical activities, Vildmanas-Zaidmanas also conducted the Kaunas Radio Orchestra. As indicated in the statement by Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, attached to Sudarsky's request, in the context of creating a Jewish Opera Studio he first of all identified himself with his pedagogical position as the violin teacher at the State Music School.

1 Sudarsky and his wife Alte were also both involved in founding the YIVO Institute in Vilnius in 1925. In 1937 they immigrated to the United States and settled in New York.

2 Zaidmanas was his pseudonym.

3 The street is now called Savanorių Avenue.



Illustration 1. The request of the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society to the Minister of Education for permission to open a Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas, as received by the Ministry. September 3, 1926. Lithuanian Central State Archives

Another two documents, which accompanied Sudarsky's request, were a curriculum for the Jewish Opera Studio (*Žydų operos studijos programa*) and regulations of the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society (*Lietuvos žydų švietimo draugijos įstatai*), which included two points from the society's stated goals: a) "to help promote general and vocational education among Lithuanian Jews"; b) "to raise the cultural level of the Jewish people".⁴ The regulations also stated that the language of instruction in all of the Society's institutions is "Jewish" (i.e., Yiddish) (Illustration 2).

The courses planned for the Jewish Opera Studio were: singing – 24 hours per month with Italian baritone Oreste Marini, who had sung at La Scala Theatre and taught singing at the State Music School in Kaunas from 1922; music theory and solfeggio – 8 and 16 hours per month respectively, taught by Vildmanas-Zaidmanas; piano – 16 hours per month, taught by Zaidmanienė;⁵ solo-ensemble singing and choir – 24 and 16 hours per month respectively, taught by Vildmanas-Zaidmanas; graceful movement – 8 hours per month, taught by Petronėlė Dineikienė, former teacher of the State Music School's opera class, and one of the pioneers of physical culture, and the rhythmic and graceful movement arts in Lithuania; stage technique and make-up, and history of art and theatre – 4 and 8 hours per month respectively, taught by Vytautas Bičiūnas, a Lithuanian theatre actor, writer, painter, art and literature critic; Jewish language and literature –

4 Lithuanian Central State Archives (*Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas*, henceforth – LCVA). Col. 391, inv. 4, fol. 1142, p. 290, 346.

5 Although no first name is given, it can be assumed that this was the wife of Vildmanas-Zaidmanas. On January 1, 1920 Izaokas Vildmanas (his surname is indicated on the marriage certificate without a pseudonym) married Jeva Buršteinaitė (1898–?), who was born in the small town of Širvintos about 50 km from Vilnius. The hyphen next to the bride's occupation on the marriage certificate suggests that she did not have a profession at that time, and most probably was still studying (Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art (*Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyvas*, henceforth – LLMA). Col. 84, inv. 4, fol. 75, p. 1). In her passport, issued one year later, on February 8, 1921, Jeva Buršteinaitė Vildmanienė's occupation is already recorded as "violinist" ("griežykė" in Lithuanian; Kaunas Regional State Archive (*Kauno regioninis valstybės archyvas*, henceforth – KRA). Col. 66, inv. 1, fol. 3052). She could have been a pupil of her future husband Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, who was 13 years her senior. In 1930, the name of J. Vildmanienė is mentioned in the list of students who graduated from the State Music School in singing, completing only their specialty subject (*Grudis* 1930: 35), and in her passport, issued on August 5, 1931, her occupation is already listed as "singer" (KRA. Col. 66, inv. 1, fol. 3045). In 1936, the name of singer Jeva Vildman, born in 1898, is mentioned as residing in Paris, in the Hôpital Saint-Louis quarter with her friend, actor Haince Voldemar from Poland (1936 census records... n. d.). Later she returned to Lithuania. In the list of residents of Vilnius city scheduled for arrest in June 1941, about whose arrest there is no data, she appears as Eva Vildman-Zaidman, artist of the State Jewish Drama Theatre, born in 1898. The reason given for her arrest was her connection with abroad (Lithuanian Special Archives (*Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas*, henceforth – LYA). Col. V-135, inv. 7, fol. 4, p. 36).

LIETUVOS
ŽYDŲ ŠVIETIMO
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KAUNAS, Ožeskiėnė 9-vė 3 Nr.

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Telef. 936 Nr.

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אין ליטען.
קאָנאָקאָ גאָס נאָר 3.
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Žydu Operos Studijos p r o g r a m a.

Dainavimas.....	24 val.	mėnesiui.....	p. Marini
Muzikos Teorija.....	8	" "	p. Zaidmanas
Solfedžio.....	16	" "	P. "
Portepijonas.....	16	" "	P. la Zaidmaniene
Solo-ansamblis.....	24	" "	p. Zaidmanas
Choras.....	16	" "	" "
Plastika.....	8	" "	p. la Dineikiene
Scenos Technika ir grimas.....	4	" "	p. Bičiūnas
Meno ir teatro istorija.....	8	" "	p. "
Žydu kalba ir literatūra.....	16	" "	p. Kopeliovičius.

Dr. H. J. ...
Priminimas

Ch. ...

J. Vildena ...
Studijos Vedejas

Illustration 2. Curriculum of the Jewish Opera Studio. September 2, 1926. Lithuanian Central State Archives

16 hours per month, taught by Leizer Kopeliovitch, teacher at the Kaunas Jewish High School.⁶

On September 11, 1926, the Ministry of Education instructed the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society to supplement the request for permission to establish a Jewish Opera Studio with the academic qualifications of the prospective teachers and a detailed curriculum. Later, more questions were received from the Ministry – regarding the funds planned for the maintenance of the Jewish Opera Studio, more details regarding the curriculum and the language of instruction – as evidenced by the response of the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society on November 3, 1926. The Society informed the Art Advisor to the Ministry of Education that it would allocate a monthly grant of 500 litas to the Jewish Opera Studio, that the Studio's curriculum would comprise of two courses and that the studies would be taught in Jewish (i.e., Yiddish) and partly in Lithuanian⁷ (Illustration 3).

It was planned that the *first*, or *lower* group would study for a year, and the *second*, or *higher* group would study for two years. While learning singing, the first group would study voice formation and vocalisation, the second group – opera parts. Common planned subjects for both groups were: 1) elementary course of music theory; 2) solfeggio, ear training, sight-reading; 3) stage movement – elements and positions, graceful movement groups (of the Dalcroze school), rhythmic, improvisation; 4) stage technique and make-up; 5) history of art and theatre; 6) Jewish language and literature; 7) piano (course required for students to study parts). Choir classes – formation of correct breathing, choral ensemble (singing of different choral pieces related to the opera repertoire) – were also planned, but it was not specified whether they were intended for both study groups. The last section on the curriculum – opera ensembles, scenes and full productions – was most probably intended only for the second, or higher group.⁸

After receiving answers to the questions of concern, the Ministry of Education, by the decree of the Minister of Education Vincas Čepinskis No. 363, November 12, 1926, granted permission to the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society “To establish and maintain the Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio at its own expense” (Švietimo ministro įsakymas 1926: 1326–1327) – although the above mentioned intention of the Society to allocate the monthly sum of only 500 litas for the support of the Studio showed that the Society did not have sufficient funds. Vildmanas-Zaidmanas was approved for the position of the head of the Studio, and Marini, Zaidmanienė, Dineikienė, Bičiūnas and

6 LCVA. Col. 391, inv. 4, fol. 1142, p. 346–347.

7 LCVA. Col. 391, inv. 4, fol. 1142, p. 252.

8 LCVA. Col. 391, inv. 4, fol. 1142, p. 289.

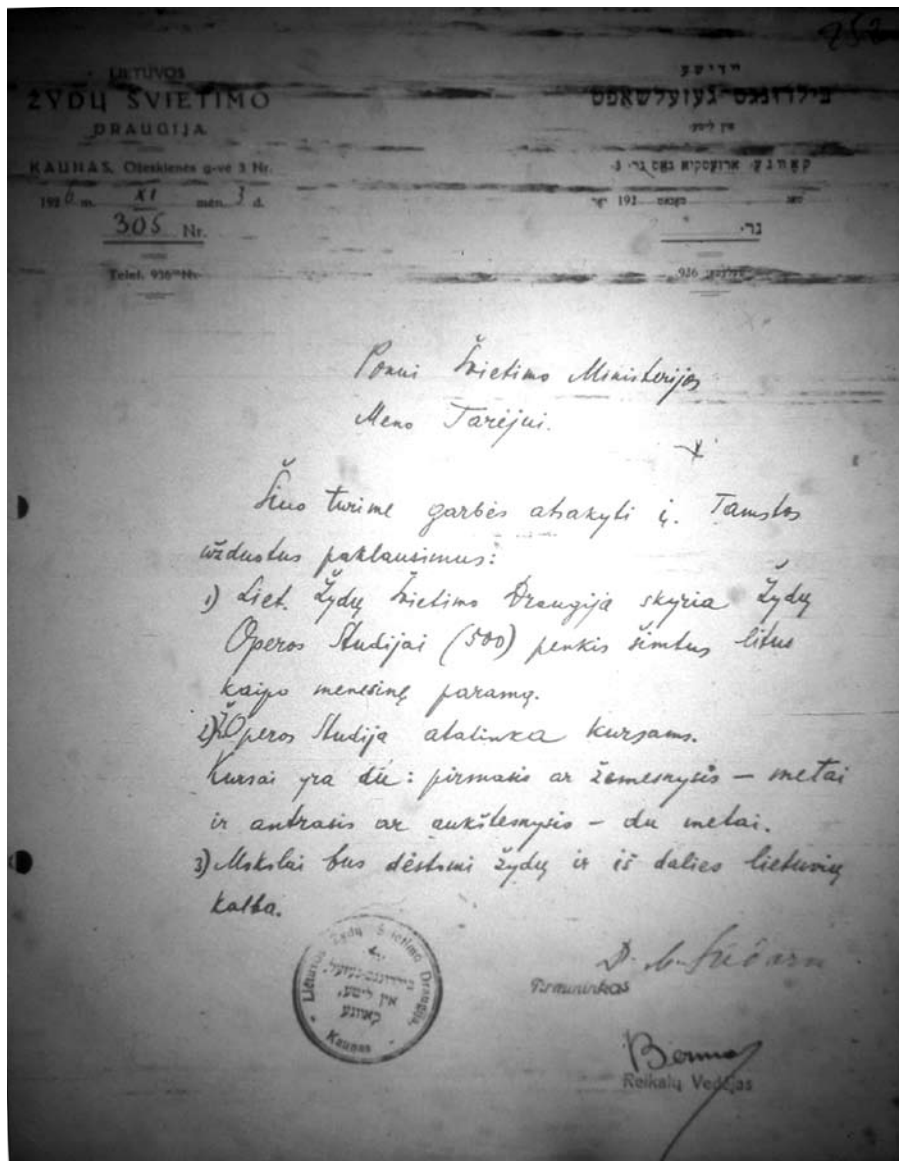


Illustration 3. The response of the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society to the Art Advisor of the Ministry of Education regarding the funds planned for the maintenance of the Jewish Opera Studio, the curriculum details and the language of instruction. November 3, 1926. Lithuanian Central State Archives

Kopeliovitich were appointed as teachers. The fact that the team consisted of prominent professionals in their field at the time testifies that the founders of the Jewish Opera Studio had serious ambitions for this educational institution and believed in its potential. Also, the fact that Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, despite his diverse performing and pedagogical activities, agreed to lead the Jewish Opera Studio suggests that he was a dedicated educator who spared no time and effort.

The memoirs by former resident of Kaunas, shoemaker Leib Nadel (1906–1982), provide some information about the repertoire, staff and activities of the Jewish Opera Studio, as well as about the prevailing atmosphere in the institution and the social repercussions of the Studio's performances. Nadel survived the Holocaust and emigrated to the USA in 1945.⁹ He was one of the contributors to the first volume of *Lite (Lithuania) Yizkor Book*, initiated by Sudarsky and his wife after their emigration to the USA, and dedicated to commemorate the history of destroyed Lithuanian Jewish communities.¹⁰ Nadel wrote on musical topics, one of them being the establishment of a Jewish Opera Studio in 1926. Since he wrote his memoirs several decades later, after having experienced persecution, threats to life and the loss of family members during the Holocaust, some facts, names or titles are not accurate and require clarification.¹¹ Nevertheless, Nadel's memoirs are an important authentic source of information, written from the perspective of an eyewitness, and have special value for research on this topic. It is likely that he himself was involved in the activities of the Jewish Opera Studio, as his later life, besides making his living as a shoemaker, was connected with singing. Living in the US, Nadel obtained a cantorial degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and was also often hired as a chazzan (cantor). He led High Holiday services at the synagogue of the Jewish Center of Island Park on Long Island, and made a record of cantorial music for a *landsmanshaft* (hometown association for Jewish immigrants) in New York.¹²

9 Leib (Leo) Nadel was born in Vilnius. He had married Dvoira Ethel Fainshtein (1907–1941), with whom he had a son Eric and daughters Leah and Meirele. Only Leib and his son Eric survived the Holocaust. Nadel died in New York.

10 *Lite Yizkor Book* (1951–1965) is a two-volume memorial book written in Yiddish and Hebrew, and published by the Jewish-Lithuanian Cultural Society Lite in New York, headed by Sudarsky. Editors of the volumes were Sudarsky, Katzenelenbogen, J. Kissin and Ch. Leikowicz. The book is still being translated into English and published online at: <https://www.jewishngen.org/yizkor/lithuania01/lithuania01.html>. Last accessed 08-11-2025.

11 In the article, corrections of certain information in Nadel's memoirs have been made where data was available.

12 This information was provided to the author of the article by Miriam Nadel, granddaughter of Leib Nadel, in an email dated December 9, 2025.

In his memoirs, Nadel emphasised the greatest input of Mendel Sudarsky and his wife Alte in realising the idea of creating the Studio, as well as the very active and enthusiastic response from the “best young singers in the city, among them several who had graduated from conservatories in Europe” (Nadel n. d.). He mentioned that a symphonic orchestra of Jewish students at the Kaunas State Music School was also created at the Studio. The first public performance of the Jewish Opera Studio took place already after three months, in the Volkshaus in Kaunas; due to huge interest from the city’s public, who wanted to attend the event of the opening of a Jewish opera company, additional seats had to be placed in the aisles of the theatre (*ibid.*). The first performance consisted of three parts. The concert started with the prologue of the opera *Faust* by Charles Gounod, performed by the graduate of the Kaunas Music School and teacher at the Kaunas Jewish High School Jakovas Glezeris, “who had a rare, beautiful basso profundo” (*ibid.*). Jakovas Zaksas, also a graduate of the Kaunas Music School, “possessed a rare, beautiful lyrical tenor and had been promised a great future by the professors” (*ibid.*). The second part, according to Nadel, featured the choir of the Jewish Opera Studio performing fragments from the operas *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and *Tosca* by Giacomo Puccini, as well as another work which is not clearly known.¹³ In the third part, according to Nadel, the second act of the opera by Pyotr Tchaikovsky *Evgeny Onegin* was performed “by the well-known female singers: Sheinzon and Zeidman”¹⁴ (*ibid.*). The success of this first public performance of the Jewish Opera Studio encouraged both teachers and students to work even more energetically, and rehearsals began for the full staging of the opera *Faust*. Nadel mentioned several other very successful concerts that took place; however, he also stressed that the Studio had colossal expenditures and the financial situation was difficult. “More than once, during difficult moments, the managing committee ran to the father of the Studio, to the esteemed Dr Sudarski, for money to pay Prof. Manini¹⁵ because the latter did not get involved with such matters. If he were not paid first, he would not sit at the piano and did not start his work” (*ibid.*).

After one year of existence, the Jewish Opera Studio, of which “a great deal had been expected” (*ibid.*), was forced to close due to several reasons: constant financial struggle, the “personal family inconveniences” of Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, and “because no other such devoted person and great musician could be obtained” (*ibid.*). The personal difficul-

13 Nadel identified the work as *Rhapsody* by Georg Friedrich Handel; however, such a genre did not yet exist in the music of the Baroque era; assumingly this could have been the *Alto Rhapsody* Op. 53 for contralto, male choir and orchestra by Johannes Brahms, based on the text by Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

14 It seems that Nadel is referring to Jeva Vildmanienė (Vildman).

15 Nadel is referring to Professor Oreste Marini.

ties experienced by Vildmanas-Zaidmanas affected not only the closing of the Jewish Opera Studio but also his work at the State Music School; Juozas Tallat-Kelpša took over the leadership of the State Music School orchestra in the 1927–1928 academic year, replacing Vildmanas-Zaidmanas (Gruodis 1930: 26).

After the closing of the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas until the second attempt to establish it again in 1938, Jewish intellectuals and musicians continued to be active in the musical education of the Kaunas Jewish community. A former student of one of the private conservatories in Berlin, singer Ana Varšavskienė (1895–1944, born in Vilnius as Sarah Matz), doctor Isaakas Levitanas (1881–1954), a conductor, the singing teacher of the Kaunas Jewish gymnasium Shaul Blecharovich, who came from a renowned family of cantors in Poland and tenor Jakovas Zaksas, the aforementioned Leib Nadel and others founded the Jewish National Choir in Kaunas in 1928, named after composer Joel Engel (1868–1927), one of the leaders of the modern school of Jewish national art music. The choir consisted of 30–40 singers of different professions; those who needed also received general musical education. Starting with Jewish folk songs in Yiddish and Hebrew, the choir over time rehearsed and performed the choruses of some classical operas (*Carmen*, *Faust*) and even performed a few oratorios. The Engel Choir also gave concerts in other cities, and its recordings were broadcast by Kaunas Radio. The choir represented the art of Jewish song at the 1930 Lithuanian Song Festival. It was financially supported by the state (Finkelšteinas 2002; Pailis n. d.). Parallel to the activities of the Engel Choir, several participants of the closed Jewish Opera Studio – Zaidmanienė and Zaksas – became actors of the New Jewish Theatre, established in Kaunas in late 1928 – early 1929, and were well received by critics (Pukelytė 2017: 68–76).

The second attempt at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas in 1938

According to Julius Finkelšteinas, the culmination of the activities of Engel Choir was reached in 1930. A few years later, due to various reasons (especially the growing desire of young Jews to leave for Palestine in the 1930s), the work of the choir began to decline and its activities ceased in 1936 (Finkelšteinas 2002). Nonetheless, the Jewish population in Kaunas in the 1930s constituted slightly more than a quarter of the total population of Kaunas, so naturally there was a need to create opportunities for local Jewish musicians to perform, and to continue developing the musical tastes of the community.

At the beginning of 1938, a second attempt was made at establishing the Jewish Opera Studio; for that purpose, the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art was established, which, as described in the Jewish weekly *Apžvalga* (Review), published in Lithuanian, was “determined to enable all Jewish talents to develop in the field of music and to show the fruits of their labour to the public” (Dėl žydų operos 1938: 5). The Society settled in the premises of the former restaurant and variety show *Miramar* on Ožėškienės Street, renovated it with the collected funds and planned to hold performances, lectures, concerts and cultural meetings. One of the initiators of the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art was the Riga-born cantor and singer, lyrical tenor Misha Alexandrovich (1914–2002), who was the Obercantor of the Kaunas Choral synagogue from 1937 to 1940. Alexandrovich, seeking to make cantorial singing more modern and understandable to the younger generation of the Jewish community, combined traditional cantorial singing and the Italian *bel canto* vocal school. He cooperated with Lithuanian opera soloists – first of all, with tenor Kipras Petrauskas, the most famous Lithuanian opera singer of the time. Alexandrovich himself participated in opera performances and organised concerts of operatic music in the synagogue, where he used to invite musicians from the State Theatre Orchestra. Therefore, he strongly supported the idea of establishing a Jewish Opera Studio.

The newly assembled team consisted of experienced professional soloists, as well as amateur singers. The choir of 40 (mostly amateur) singers was formed and led by conductor Blecharovich; a well-known Kaunas pianist and conductor Leiba Hofmekler (1900–1941) was invited to conduct the orchestra, of which more than half of the members were from the State Theatre Orchestra, and Lithuanian stage director Stasys Dautartas (1899–1989) was invited to direct the following opera acts: the second act from *Rigoletto*, the third act from *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi, and the second act from *Evgeny Onegin*.¹⁶ Additionally, the organisers of the concert aimed to draw the public’s attention to the financial support required for the Opera Studio’s ambitions. As was conveyed in the message introducing the initiative, “it goes without saying that such a huge undertaking requires a lot of funds. Therefore, it can be expected that everyone who understands the significance of this idea will sincerely support it both morally and materially” (J. Z. 1938: 9). The results of the intense work of several months were shown to the public in the Volkshaus, and the performance was reviewed in the article “Žydų operos spektaklis” (“A Jewish opera performance”)¹⁷ by tenor Jakovas Zaksas, who had been a member of the first Jewish Opera Studio and of Jewish theatre troupes:

16 The translation of the opera texts into Yiddish was done by R. Corfas.

17 Published in *Apžvalga* on March 13, 1938.

[...] This is a rather bold but, in all respects, welcome idea of several local Jewish singers who aim to create a permanent Jewish opera in Kaunas or at least to show individual fragments of popular operas in the Jewish language from time to time. The very fact that this idea was carried out until the first performance [...] is a great merit of the aforementioned group of pioneers of Jewish opera, because many obstacles had to be overcome in the implementation of this idea (*ibid.*: 5).

Among the soloists, Zaksas singled out the soloist of the State Theatre, baritone Chanonas Šulginas (Rigoletto and Amonasro), who showed “excellent vocal and acting skills”, the “gentle and lyrical” tenor Alexandrovich (Duke), who was “distinguished by true vocal culture and deep musicality”, M. (Meriam?) Šmuklierienė (Gilda), who “has a soft lyrical coloratura soprano with a pleasant timbre and is well-educated”, L. Altmanas, who “showed his juicy beautiful-sounding bass and quite a likeable posture in two roles – Sparafucile and Ramses” (*ibid.*). The role of Aida was sung by D. (Dvoira?) Račkienė, “who showed such vocal material that would enable her to sing on a real opera stage. She has a strong soprano voice, characterised by a very beautiful timbre. Her voice sounds free and convincing in all registers. Her bright diction is also noteworthy” (*ibid.*). The reviewer also did not spare some criticism for the lyrical tenor N. Aronavičius, who “does not fit in with the dramatic part of Radames”, and for the decision to assign the part of Amneris, which should have been sung by a mezzo-soprano, to Šmuklierienė – a lyric coloratura soprano. Zaksas assessed the choir as sounding quite good, considering that it was composed mostly of amateurs. He noticed that most of the soloists did not feel free on stage, and pointed out that “they cannot be subjected to the same demands as professional opera singers, as was wrongly done by some of the abundant audience that came to the performance” (*ibid.*). According to the reviewer, many participants of the studio still needed further training and supervision from experienced professionals.

One year later, on March 12, 1939, Zaksas published a detailed review of the third concert of the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art. He reminded readers of the goal of the Society, “to enable young Jewish writers, artists, singers and instrumentalists, as well as experienced professionals, to appear publicly, to present their talents and artistic achievements on stage in front of an audience“ (Zaksas 1939: 7). The concert started with Jewish songs sung by the choir, and Zaksas praised the conductor Blecharovich, “who was able to create a harmonious and obedient collective from the musically raw material”; therefore it can be assumed that the choir had made considerable progress over the year. Zaksas paid attention to the young soprano Zeldā Goldingaitė, who stood out among the choir members as having good vocal material, and who “should certainly learn singing, because a serious singer can develop from such material (and musicality)” (*ibid.*).

He also named Šmuklierienė – a lyric coloratura soprano “of gentle tembre” – as a promising singer. Thus, the Jewish Opera Studio, established for the second time, had within one year of rehearsals and activities provided an opportunity to discover young promising musicians.

Besides the great success of baritone Šulginas, Zaksas mentioned the “brilliant performance” of Leiba Hofmekler as a pianist, accompanying the singers, and as conductor of the recently formed string orchestra, which played “A Little Night Music” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (the second part of the third concert of the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art was comprised of instrumental music). At the end of the concert, the 15-year-old pianist, virtuoso Chaimas Potašinskas performed Johann Sebastian Bach’s Concerto in D minor for harpsichord and string orchestra “almost like a perfect virtuoso” (*ibid.*), and Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 by Franz Liszt.

In one year, the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art organised three successful concerts. However, this second attempt to establish the Jewish Opera Studio in Kaunas was also a short-lived initiative. As Pukelytė put it, “The emergence and maintenance of permanent theatres required significantly greater support from the state and society, which, unfortunately, was not received” (Pukelytė 2017: 110–111). Soon after, with the first Soviet occupation in June 1940, and with the Nazi occupation one year later, the political situation in Lithuania changed drastically. During the Holocaust, nearly all of the Jews in Kaunas were annihilated – including Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, Ana Varšavskienė, Leiba Hofmekleris, Jakovas Glezeris, Jakovas Zaksas and most of the other intellectuals, artists and musicians. The short-lived existence of the Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio remained only in the pages of archives and newspapers.

Conclusions

The Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio was established twice – under the Lithuanian Jewish Educational Society (in 1926) and under the Society for the Support of Jewish Theatre and Art (1938). The effort to have their own opera studio shows the determination and artistic capabilities of the Kaunas interwar Jewish intelligentsia, the education and encouragement of the Kaunas Jewish community provided to young Jewish musicians to foster their talents and to provide them a space to perform, as well as the aspiration to develop knowledge of the classical opera repertoire within the Jewish community by performing works or their parts in its native Yiddish language. However, both attempts to develop the activities of the Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio were short-lived and continued for only one year due to administrative problems and a lack of financial

support. It is noteworthy that between these two initiatives, Jewish musical education in Kaunas had continued with the formation and performances of the Engel Choir, which functioned from 1928 until 1936.

The surviving documents of the establishment process of the Kaunas Jewish Opera Studio (1926), as well as press reviews and memoirs, indicate that the studio's activities were led by the best professional Jewish musicians and teachers of the time, also with the participation of renowned Lithuanian artists and pedagogues. This cultural phenomenon is also testimony of the atmosphere of Lithuanian-Jewish artistic cooperation and the fostering of creative ties under rather favourable political and cultural circumstances – in the so-called “golden age” of Lithuanian Jews.

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Du mėginimai įkurti Žydų operos studiją tarpukario Kaune: tikslai, steigėjai ir veikla

SANTRAUKA. 1918 m. Lietuvai atkūrus nepriklausomybę, jos piliečiai žydai aktyviai prisidėjo prie šalies augimo įvairiose srityse, darė didelę įtaką Lietuvos kultūros, mokslo ir meno raidai, kūrė savo kultūros ir švietimo įstaigas bei meno kolektyvus. Tarp dar neištirtų temų, susijusių su tarpukario kultūros ir meno reiškiniais, kuriuos formavo tuometė daugiakultūrė Lietuvos aplinka, yra du mėginimai įkurti Žydų operos studiją tarpukario Kaune – 1926 ir 1938 metais. Remiantis archyvine medžiaga, apžvalgomis tarpukario Kauno spaudoje ir amžininkų prisiminimais, straipsnyje pristatomi Žydų operos studijos tikslai, steigėjai ir veikla.

Nepaisant to, kad abu kartus Žydų operos studijos veikla dėl administracinių ir finansinių problemų buvo trumpalaikė, jos indėlis į Kauno muzikinį gyvenimą ir žydų bendruomenės muzikinį ugdymą yra gana reikšmingas. Studijos veikla skatino jaunas žydų muzikus puoselėti savo talentus, suteikė jiems erdvę koncertuoti, taip pat ugdė žydų bendruomenės muzikinį skonį ir suteikė jai galimybę klausytis klasikinių operų fragmentų, atliekamų gimtąja jidiš kalba. Išlikę Kauno žydų operos studijos įkūrimo proceso (1926 m.) dokumentai, spaudos apžvalgos ir atsiminimai rodo, kad studijos veiklai vadovavo geriausi to meto profesionalūs žydų muzikantai ir mokytojai, kad jos veikloje dalyvavo ir žymūs Lietuvos menininkai bei pedagogai.

REIKŠMINIAI

ŽODŽIAI:

Žydų operos studija, Kaunas, muzikinis ugdymas, tarpukaris, Izaokas Vildmanas-Zaidmanas, Mendel Sudarsky.