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Inside, I'm handed an English language menu without having to ask, by a sweet-faced young waitress modishly dressed in black like the rest of the serving staff and chefs. I pick through a vast array of inside-out rolls, tempura and soup noodles, and wash it all down with jasmine tea. The whole effect is decidedly Oriental. But the fact that diners can smoke in between bites of sashimi is a reminder we're in the Middle East.

The peace process remains as moribund as ever. The Palestinian unilateral declaration of independence at the UN, expected later this month, may have just about as much impact on the lives of people here as does this temporary availability of yakitori.

Because, in any case, the Ramallah sushi venture was rather short-lived. When I enquire again, ahead of another trip to the region, I find out that Soho closed a few months after it opened, having failed to reach its sales target. Now it's gone back to the tried-and-tested format of Mediterranean-Oriental cuisine. Its manager, Eyad Nimer, is sanguine about the experiment.

"I personally love sushi," he says. "But here, nobody was really interested. It's not just that it was expensive — to be honest, a lot of people tried it and said 'yuck, what's that, it's nasty, I don't know what it is'."

"The West Bank doesn't have a beach," he explains. "In Palestine, people prefer to eat their fish cooked."

— Daniella Peled



Books

The Messiah of Vilnius

Vilnius ¶ Wyman Brent's non-Jewishness is a little confusing. This is only partially due to the bright orange yarmulke he occasionally wears; it's more that he has dedicated a good part of his life towards the Vilnius Jewish Library, of which he is conceiver, founder, fundraiser, book-solicitor, administrator, and, naturally, librarian. The library, after more than eight years of dreaming and planning and setbacks is, amazingly, due to open this November.

Brent, 48, originally of Lynchburg, Virginia, is rail-thin and has dark shoulder-length hair left completely un-styled; he looks vaguely monastic from the neck down. He speaks easily and softly, never interrupting and with a gentle pride. The library is the product of sheer persistence, serendipity and a complete disregard for the economics involved: he estimates that he's spent \$50,000 to date on the project. "I am simply someone who is very stubborn", he says. "And I have absolutely no money now." After three potential locations fell through Brent happened upon some Lithuanian *machers* and with their help he's secured the support of the Lithuanian government — which means a rent-free spot and \$300,000 for renovations.

That spot is a second floor walk-up in a courtyard on Gediminas Avenue, a main thoroughfare in downtown Vilnius. It will initially house about 5000 items including books, DVDs, CDs, art, and random memorabilia (like autographed baseballs). He has plans for 100,000 books, though the current space has a capacity of, at shelf-bending maximum, 20,000. "The government will simply have to find me a bigger place," he said, with a naïve (but thus far vindicated) confidence.

Fittingly, it's through books that Brent discovered both Lithuania and Jewish culture. First there was *The Hills of Vilnius* by Alfonsas Bieliauskas, which he found while in Russia in the early 90s. And in 2004, while living in San Diego and selling books online, Brent acquired one of the books in Harry Kemelman's 'Rabbi Small' series (*Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, *Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet* etc). He never read it but his roommate, who wasn't Jewish either, did and quickly developed a rabid Jew-philia. She went to Tijuana, Mexico, interviewed the rabbi and community members, and wrote an article for *The Jerusalem Post*. (This roommate recently converted to Judaism, something Brent has little interest in.) Then Brent had an epiphany. "It was like a light bulb went off, like in the cartoon", Brent says. "I love reading, I love Jewish culture, and I love Lithuania — I will open a Jewish library in Vilnius!" Brent immediately began collecting books, bought fancy stationery and sent letters to 36 Jewish institutions in San Diego. He got ▶