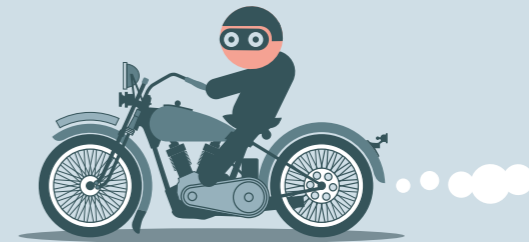


THE JEWS OF KAUNAS



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KAUNAS, 2021

THE JEWS OF KAUNAS

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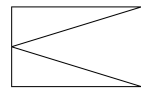
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FOREWORD

The history of Kaunas is rich and inspiring, yet many of the chapters in that history, particularly those of the city's non-Lithuanian communities, have been neglected. The decision, reached in 2017, to designate Kaunas as the European Capital of Culture in 2022, has encouraged us to revisit Kaunas' identity and history and, in the process, our own relationship with that history. What city have we inherited? What legacy have we received from those who built it? What cultures, traditions, and individuals have helped shape the face of Kaunas? And what does our own relationship with the past say about us today?

This book, *The Jews of Kaunas*, is part of the Kaunas 2022 Memory Office program. Like other initiatives within this program, this book seeks to make sense of the city's complicated past and to awaken the multiethnic memory of our city – to remember the names of those who have lived here before us and all of their achievements and contributions to the city's history.

This is also part of an endeavor to include the history of the Jews of Kaunas into the overall story of the city as an inseparable part of its history. Finally, it is also our effort to better know our own history and ourselves.

Dr. Daiva Citvarienė, Curator
Kaunas 2022 – European Capital of Culture
Memory Office Program

INTRODUCTION

Kaunas is perhaps the only large Lithuanian city that still awaits a thorough account of its history. The same could be said of the Jews of Kaunas, despite some prior attempts to compile their history. David M. Lipman, pharmacist and amateur historian, published *A History of the Jews in Kaunas and Viliampolė (1400–1850)* in Hebrew in 1934. The Association of Lithuanian Jewish People's Banks published *The Jews in Kaunas* in Yiddish in 1939, a title that served as a guide for the editors of this book initiated by the Kaunas 2022 program. We spent a long time discussing the use of the same title as a symbolic bridge between two different eras. Eventually, we chose the Lithuanian title *Kauno žydai* (The Jews of Kaunas) to emphasize that the Jews of Kaunas and their story are an inseparable part of the city's long history.

This book does not claim to provide comprehensive answers to every question about the history, culture, and traditions of Jews in Kaunas. Rather, it is an attempt to present Kaunas' Jewish history beginning with its most important facts, concepts, and names. We begin our review of the history of one of Kaunas' largest ethnic groups in the 15th century and the first Jewish settlement in the city and proceed from there to recall the names of the most important citizens of Kaunas who lived and worked in the city, remembering their contributions to education, medicine, industry, business, culture, and other aspects of life and, of course, the more painful chapters of the community's history.

A portion of this book has been compiled by incorporating the rich existing historiography, cited extensively throughout. Another substantial section of the book consists of material from new studies or additional research conducted on previously existing information. As we assembled this text, we sought to combine the various consulted materials and sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as well as published studies and archival documents. The historical material analyzed and presented in this book includes documents held by the Kaunas Regional State Archives, the Lithuanian State Historical Archives, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, and other memory institutions in Lithuania and abroad.

The English presentation of the names of individuals and organizations was particularly challenging, given the diversity of spelling variations and sources (from a scarcity of documents for the 15th–17th centuries, to an abundance of spelling variations in the interwar period) and numerous linguistic transcription

conventions and name changes throughout history. As a general rule, we have chosen to present the most prevalent English form of a given name or that individual's preferred spelling, when known. In instances where only a Slavic or Lithuanian presentation of a name is known, we have followed a uniform English transcription from the original Yiddish or Hebrew. Finally, in a few cases, particularly during the interwar Republic of Lithuania, we have provided alternative spellings of names as they may have appeared in civil records or contemporary accounts.

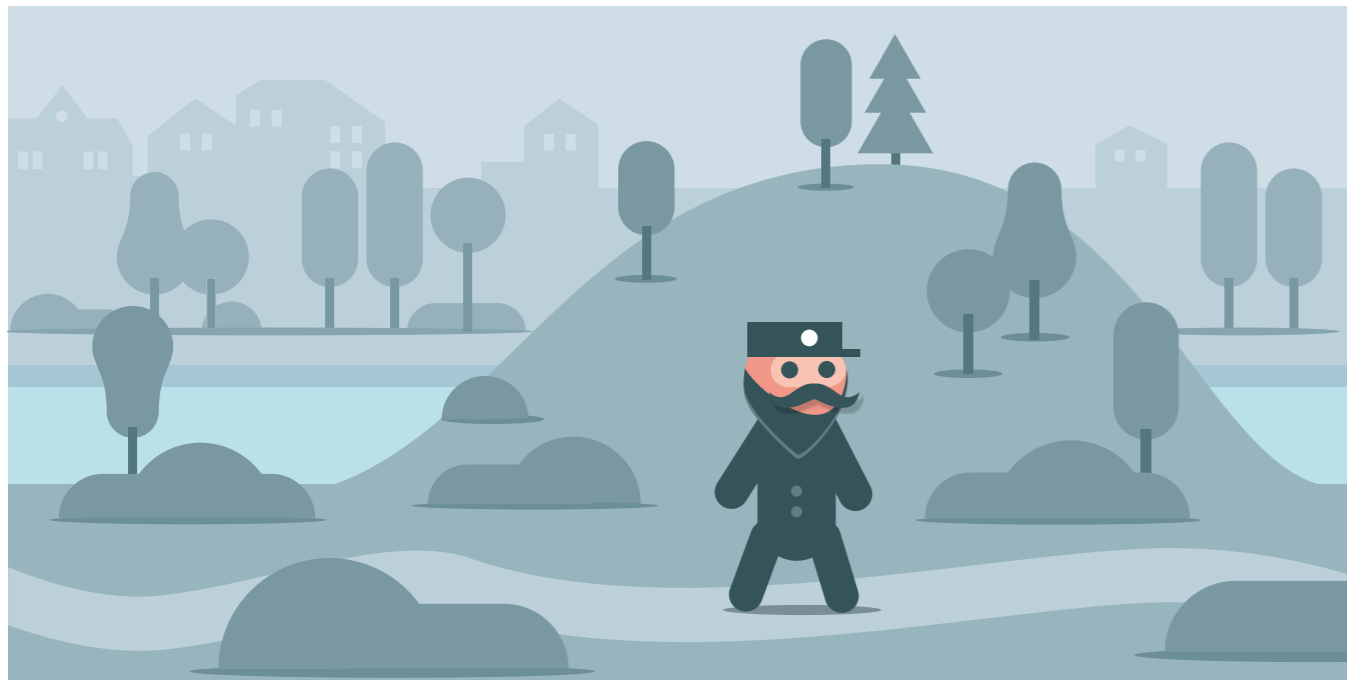
We thank Dr. Lara Lempertienė and Jolanta Donskienė for their consultation.

The Editors

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNIA – National Historical Archives of Belarus
NČDM – M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art (Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus)
KMM – Kaunas City Museum (Kauno miesto muziejus)
KVB – Kaunas County Public Library (Kauno apskrities viešoji biblioteka)
KRVA – Kaunas Regional State Archives (Kauno regioninis valstybės archyvas)
LAM – Lithuanian Aviation Museum (Lietuvos aviacijos muziejus)
LMAVB RS – Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Wroblewski Library Manuscript Department (Lietuvos mokslo akademijos Vrublevskių bibliotekos Rankraščių skyrius)
LCVA – Lithuanian Central State Archives (Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas)
LTMKM – Lithuanian Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema (Lietuvos teatro, muzikos ir kino muziejus)
LVIA – Lithuanian State Historical Archives (Lietuvos valstybės istorijos archyvas)
LNMMB – Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (Lietuvos nacionalinė Martyno Mažvydo biblioteka)
ŠAM – Šiauliai Aušros Museum (Šiaulių Aušros muziejus)
USHMM – United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
VGŽIM – Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History (Vilniaus Gaono žydų istorijos muziejus)

THE JEWS IN KAUNAS AND VILIJAMPOLĖ IN THE 15TH–18TH CENTURIES



ŽYDKALNIS

To the southeast of central Kaunas, on the left bank of the Nemunas River, is a hill that came to be known by local villagers as Žydkalnis (Jewish Hill).¹ It has also been called Jiesia castle mound and Napoleon's Hill, because it was from that site that the French leader watched his forces cross the Nemunas. The name Žydkalnis may have come into use in the 15th and 16th centuries, when the land and the hill at the confluence of the Nemunas and Jiesia Rivers came under the control of a Karaite customs official named Zubas – also referenced in some sources as Zubecas or Zubetz. In contemporary documents both he and other Karaites

were identified as Jews (“Zubas was a Jew”²), sometimes emphasizing their place of origin (“a Jew from Trakai”³). In addition to the aforementioned land holdings, Zubas also acquired a house in the city of Kaunas.

² Stephen C. Rowell. *Christian Understanding of the Faith through Contacts with Non-Christians in the Late-Mediaeval Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Bažnyčios istorijos studijos*, t. 6. Vilnius, 2013, 335.

³ Įrašas nr. 700. *Kauno miesto aktų knygos XVI–XVIII a. 1561–1564 m. Kauno vaiko knyga*. Parengė Darius Antanavičius, Algirdas Baliulis, Vilnius, 2013, 147.

¹ *Pinkas ha-kehillot. Lita. Encyclopaedia of Jewish communities*. Ed. Dov Levin. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1996. https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_lita/Pinkas_Lita.html. See also: Bronius Kviklys. *Mūsų Lietuva*, t. 2, Chicago, 1964.



CUSTOMS OFFICIALS

Customs officials were the first Jews in Kaunas to be identified by name. Individuals as well as groups could become customs officers, who would then rent a customs post from the ruler or purchase it for an agreed upon price reflecting the flow of goods through a given customs post. Customs offices employed clerks, supervisors, tax collectors, and other officials.

The first Kaunas customs official mentioned in archival sources was a man by the name of Danilas, who had leased a customs post in the latter half of the 15th century. His son Zubas took over the customs post lease and continued to work there until 1494.⁴

⁴ Zigmantas Kiaupa. *Kauno istorija nuo seniausių laikų iki 1655 metų*, t. 1, Vilnius, 2010, 95.

The customs officer Abraham Yezofovich leased a Kaunas customs post between 1507 and 1509 for the price of 2,040 groszy kopas (roughly 122,000 groszy – Ed.) and 20 rolls of fabric. Later, as the tenants for the customs post changed in the 16th century, Jews were employed by the customs house as tax collectors. When customs officials were relocated to Kaunas, they were accompanied by their families and other Jewish clerks and servants. But such cases were rare.⁵ The future Jewish community began to take shape only later, in the 17th century.

⁵ *Pinkas ha-kehillot. Lita*.



CUSTOMS OFFICE

The Customs Office likely stood on a site between the Nemunas River port and the corner of Turgaus (Market) Square, today's Rotušės (City Hall) Square. The street that developed alongside the office later came to be known as Muitinės (Customs) Street. The section between present day M. Daukšos and V. Kuzmos Streets was identified in Polish sources in the 17th and 18th centuries as *Żydowska mytnia* (Jewish Customs Office), or simply *Żydowska* (Jewish) Street,⁶ a name also sometimes used to identify the entire surrounding neighborhood inhabited by Jews.

6 Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno miesto santykiai su žydais XVIII amžiuje. *Kauno istorijos metraštis*, t. 5, Kaunas, 2004, 87.

MERCHANTS

Kaunas evolved into a regional trading hub in the 16th century.⁷ The city became known for its robust urban community and extensive self-governance over economic, administrative, and legal affairs.⁸

Up to the mid-17th century, the merchant community was a considerably close-knit group, shunning any new competitors and actively protecting its economic monopoly. As the number of Jewish merchants began to increase in the mid-16th century, displeased

7 Zigmantas Kiaupa. *Kauno istorija nuo seniausių laikų iki 1655 metų*, 100.

8 Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno žydų istorija ir paveldas. *Žydai Lietuvoje*. <http://www.zydai.lt/lt/content/viewitem/680/>



Kaunas shop owners began to file complaints against them with the Kaunas City Council. In 1556, the council prohibited the Jewish shopkeeper Joachim from conducting any trade at his kiosk, but he was allowed “to continue trading, if he so desired, from a covered wagon, like other Jews.”⁹ In 1562, trade was subjected to even more stringent regulations. The council decreed that “henceforth, Jews will be strictly forbidden from trading near kiosks owned by city residents and are directed to do so behind the shopkeepers’ street at the location assigned to them in front of the new City Hall, and not on Mondays or Wednesdays, but only on the usual market day – Tuesday.”¹⁰

9 Įrašas nr. 71. *Kauno miesto aktų knygos XVI–XVIII a. Tarybos knyga 1555–1564 m.* Parengė Darius Antanavičius. Vilnius, 2013, 17.

10 Įrašas nr. 1103. *Kauno miesto aktų knygos XVI–XVIII a. Tarybos knyga 1555–1564 m.* Parengė Darius Antanavičius. Vilnius, 2013, 217.

Eventually, in 1568, the council and the entire town community unanimously adopted resolutions stating that:

*No city residents may trade with Jews, the customs office, or other persons within the city of Kaunas, and must also not permit Jews to unload their [Jewish] goods at their [city residents’] storehouses along the Nemunas riverbank. . . . City residents apprehended in the act of selling Jewish goods as their own or having declared them at the customs office, shall be fined. Jews are free to transport their goods [by river] to Vilnius, Grodno, and anywhere else they desire, but shall be prohibited from unloading them on shore in Kaunas or along the Nemunas River.*¹¹

THE CASTLE JURYDYKA (JURISDICTION)

During the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), Kaunas could generally be considered a city, i.e. an entity consisting of a territory governed by a magistrate, granted by privilege of the ruler or otherwise acquired, and subject to Magdeburg Law, as well as other lands, known in Polish as a *jurydyka* (jurisdiction) belonging to individuals or institutions of other classes and in which other laws applied.¹² A *jurydyka* was a portion of land within a city entrusted to the care of an individual or institution. In addition to the Pilies (Castle) *jurydyka*, also known as the Seniūno (Eldership) *jurydyka*, Kaunas also consisted of other territories – land holdings around noblemen’s homes, church lands, and monasteries – that were independent of the city.

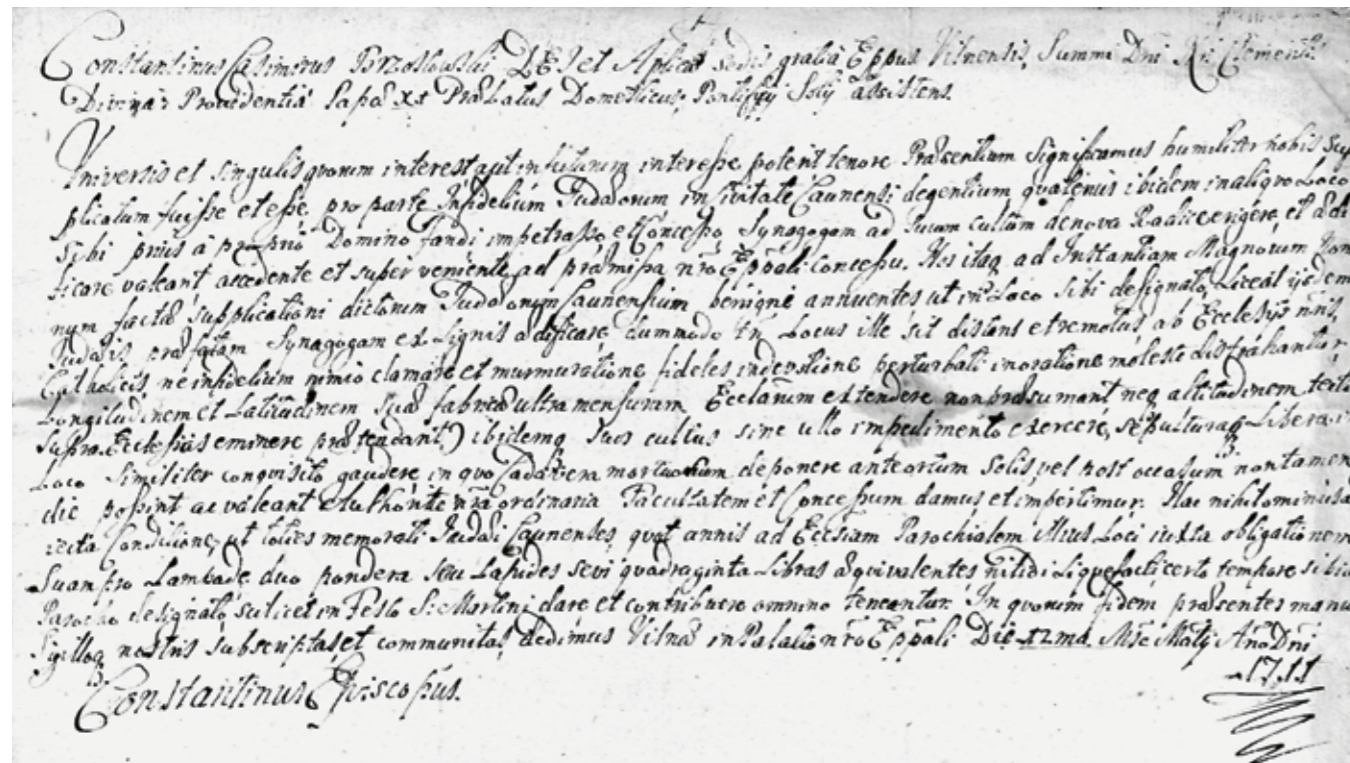
The number of Jews in Kaunas began to grow in the late 17th century and they began to settle not only on lands controlled by the customs office, but also in the Castle *jurydyka*, where they eventually built homes.¹³

For Jews settling within the Castle *jurydyka*, establishing residence here ensured important legal protection and the opportunity to trade. Designated in the Middle Ages, the Castle *jurydyka* was one of the largest land holdings in Kaunas not subject to city rule.

11 Įrašas nr. 128. *Kauno miesto aktų knygos XVI–XVIII a. Tarybos knyga 1568–1570/1 m.* Parengė Darius Antanavičius. Vilnius, 2013, 35.

12 Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno miesto santykiai su žydais XVIII amžiuje, 83.

13 Ibid., 87.



Permission from Bishop K. K. Brzostowski allowing the construction of a Jewish synagogue in Kaunas. (LMAVB RS)

RELATIONS WITH THE CITY

In 1711, Kaunas Jews entered into an agreement with the city government, a document signed by the elders of the Kaunas sub-kahal: Abraham Rubinovich, Isaac Abramovich and Yankel Yozefovich. The agreement stipulated that, in exchange for protection and the right to reside and trade in the city, Jews living and conducting commerce in Kaunas would pay one fifteenth of all city taxes.¹⁴

In addition, that same year the Jews of Kaunas obtained permission from the Bishop Konstanty Kazimierz Brzostowski of Vilnius to construct a wooden synagogue within the Castle jurydyka.¹⁵ A Jewish cemetery was located outside the city, across the Neris River.



Stamp from the Kaunas Jewish kahal. 1830. LVIA

¹⁴ Ibid., 88, 92.

¹⁵ LMAVB RS. F. 43, b. 9975, l. 1r.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

The main features of a Jewish community were its cemetery and synagogue. Permission to establish a cemetery and build a synagogue was granted by the Grand Duke or the ruler of other estates. An equally important consideration for the foundation of a Jewish community was the requirement to establish a minyan within a synagogue, the quorum required for public worship. Individual Jews belonged to the nearest established community with self-governing institutions.

kahal (Hebrew for “community” or “congregation”) – the governing body of a Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire. Until the 18th century, the Kaunas Jewish community was subordinate to the Grodno kahal.

minyan (Hebrew): a quorum of ten Jewish adults (13 years of age and older) required for public prayer.

rabbi (from the Hebrew *rav*, meaning “great one” or “master”): a certification of a Jewish scholar permitted to act as a religious leader when invited to do so by a given community.

sub-kahal – a small community without established self-rule institutions, completely or partially subordinate to a kahal.

synagogue (from the Greek for “assembly”): a Jewish house of worship and center of community prayer, rituals, Talmud studies, and public gatherings. Synagogues consisted of a prayer hall for men with a **bimah** (Hebrew for “platform”) – a raised platform and altar, the most brightly illuminated part of the temple. Sections reserved for women were arranged around the hall or in the synagogue entrance way. A gallery for a choir and newlyweds was sometimes installed along a temple’s western wall.

THE FOUNDING OF VILIJAMPOLÉ

Slobodka was a suburb of Kowno, destined later to become the capital of Lithuania, and already in my time an important city with many wealthy residents. As a child I reflected on the difference between the prosperity of Kowno and the poverty of its suburb; I wondered at the Divine Providence which never blessed any resident of Slobodka with the riches so common in Kowno. One day the truth dawned on me. When a citizen of Slobodka became rich, he moved to Kowno; when a citizen of Kowno was impoverished, he moved to Slobodka.

Simon Finkelstein¹⁶

Janusz Radziwiłł (Jonušas Radvila) founded the small town of Vilijampolė, also known as Slabada or Slobodka (from the Russian word *sloboda*, or settlement) on part of his estate on the right bank of the Nemunas and Neris Rivers in the mid-17th century.

The 1653 census of Vilijampolė’s inhabitants lists 23 names, only two of which are Jewish, including Abram Moyzerowicz, with the added notation “Jew”. Another entry mentions a Jew living at a tavern, which he rented for the sum of 400 zloty, but it is unclear whether this was the same A. Moyzerowicz or another individual.¹⁷

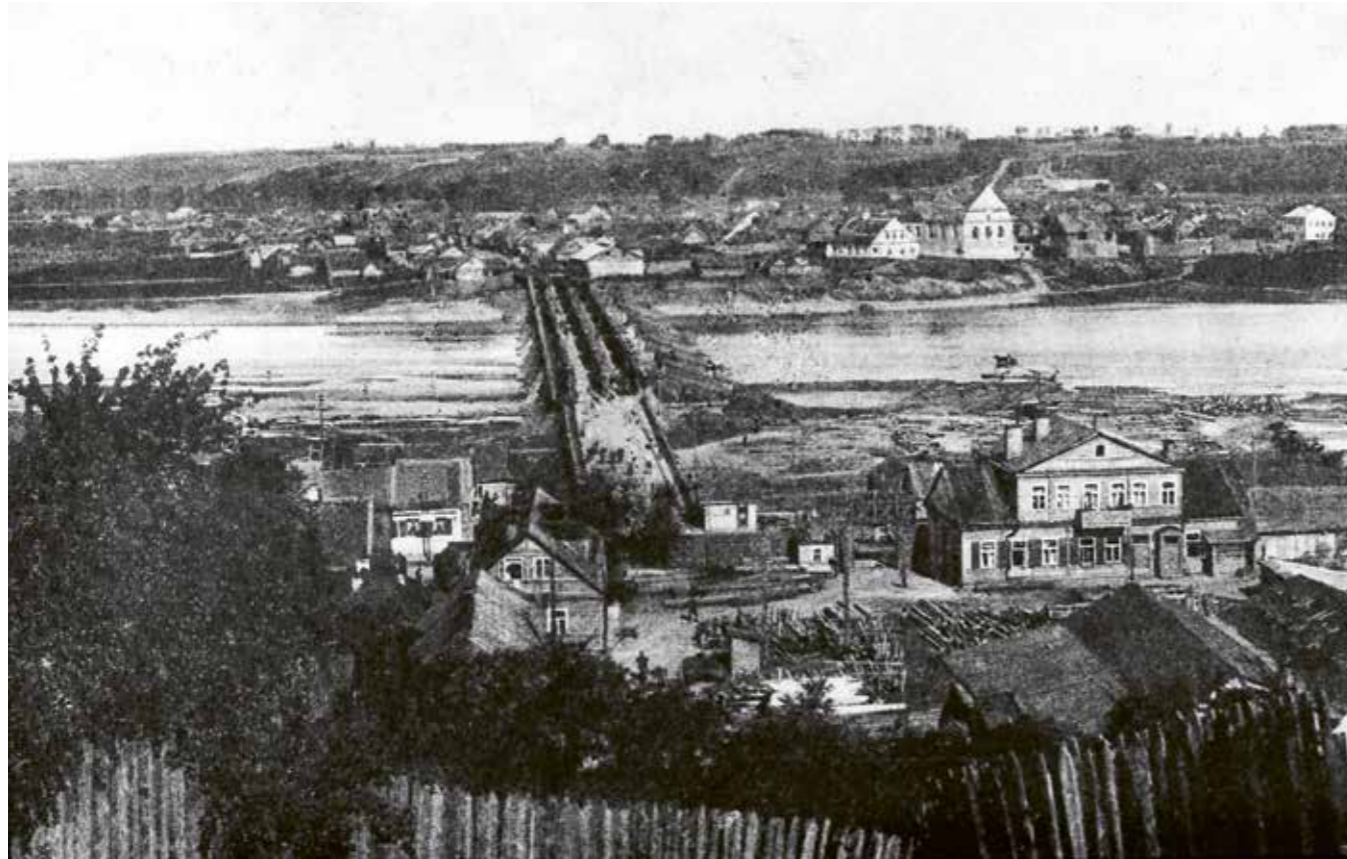
The Jewish population in Vilijampolė began to grow in the mid-18th century. The census of 1761 lists 34 inhabitants, of which 24 were Jews.¹⁸

As is customary, the Jews pay to the Milkalis estate on St. Martin’s Day six zloty for a large plot and three for a small one. A hearth tax of 2.20 zloty for the garden must be paid jointly by the Jewish community. A grosz tax has been added to each zloty. Jews must pay the amount specified for rental of their homes twice a year. Jews are responsible for renovating their rented homes themselves, however if repairs require 80 or 100 zloty, such work may be done at the expense of the [estate] treasury. Because the estate barely collected any grain or hay harvest last year due to the drought, every Jew producing broga [an ingredient in homemade vodka – Ed.] must give one barrel of broga for the maintenance of the treasury’s animals.

¹⁶ Spiritual Autobiography of Simon J. Finkelstein. *American Spiritual Autobiographies: Fifteen Self-Portraits*. Ed. Louis Finkelstein, Harper and Brothers, 1948, 3. Unless otherwise indicated, this and other citations have been translated by the editors of this book.

¹⁷ 1653 m. Vilijampolės inventoriūs. *BNIA*, f. 694, ap. 2, b. 1187, l. 10.

¹⁸ 1761 m. Vilijampolės inventoriūs. *BNIA*, f. 694, ap. 2, b. 1188, l. 10–10r.



A view of Vilijampolė in the 1920s. KMM

The estate shall transport it with their own wagons. Jews must provide farmhands for the building of a dam. As is customary, sellers of bottled alcoholic beverages must jointly pay a beverage tax to the state treasury.

1761 m. Vilijampolė Inventory¹⁹

[Vilijampolė] is populated almost entirely by Jews. The wealthier ones trade in timber and other goods. In the town, among the wealthiest is

¹⁹ Ibid., l. 11.

the Soloveichik family, while two thirds of the residents are poor. The poor Jews help others in their trade or are hired to work with timber, etc. There are eleven Christian families, most of them employed in fishing. Caught fish are sold by Christians and Jews alike. . . . The rabbi of Vilijampolė serves a term of 6 years by general consensus, as in other places. The current rabbi, Meir Isaakovich Soloveichik, has been serving without consensus, but has declared that he paid the duke 100 zloty for himself and 100 zloty for his brother, the rabbi of Kėdainiai. This rabbi, leading 2,000 Jews and 160 homes, earns from them a sizeable profit for funerals, weddings, etc. It has been proposed that the rabbi pay 500 zloty per year, which would not be



Albrecht Street in Vilijampolė. Skizzen-Mappe der Kownoer Zeitung, 1917, No. 5. LCVA

a great burden on him and the entire Jewish community. . . . Until recently Vilijampolė had no markets at all, but now, the rabbi has seen to it that Vilijampolė received privileges to hold four fairs per year and two markets per week.

1793 Vilijampolė Inventory²⁰

²⁰ 1793 Vilijampolės inventoriūs. BNIA, f. 694, ap. 2, b. 1190, l. 6, 8, 10.

DISAGREEMENTS WITH THE CITY

Despite the existence of a written agreement, relations between the Kaunas city government and the Jewish community gradually deteriorated. In 1727, the government filed a complaint against the Jews in court. After years of litigation, the court ruled in the city's favor in 1753, giving the Jews one year from the proclamation of the decision to vacate City Hall Square, all streets, all jurydykas held by nobles or clergy, the castle territory, and all homes, palaces, city plots, or lands. Jewish persons were forbidden from returning to Kaunas, produce or sell any alcoholic beverages there, run any shops or commerce, engage in any trades, or otherwise create any competition for guilds at any time, except during markets. The court's ruling stipulated that, during their departure, the lives and well-being of Jews would be assured.²¹

The Castle jurydyka became a safe haven for members of the Jewish community expelled from city lands. The jurydyka elder welcomed these Jews in good faith and in accordance with agreements concluded with a community representative.

In 1761, the city government incited riots, during which the Jewish quarter of the Castle jurydyka was attacked. Homes were burned and the quarter's residents were expelled from the city. The refugees settled in Vilijampolė and filed a complaint in court. In 1766, the court ruled against allowing the Jews to return to the Castle jurydyka, but it also ordered that they not be hindered in their travel through the city and that they be allowed to conduct business there during fairs. After the intervention of Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł, a new court ruling handed down in 1782 was more favorable to the Jews. The city of Kaunas was ordered to compensate their damages, reaching 15,000 florins, and court expenses. Instigators of the riots were sentenced to two weeks in prison.²² The ruling motivated Jews to begin returning as a community to the city of Kaunas.

In 1785, Michał Pac (Mykolas Pacas) – the starost, or elder, of Kaunas – agreed to rent his jurydyka near Kaunas Castle, inhabited by a small number of residents, to three Vilijampolė merchants, the brothers Abba, Levin, and Moses Soloveichik. Documents dated 1788 first mention the name of a Kaunas kahal, with Moses Soloveichik listed as its rabbi.²³

²¹ Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno miesto santykių su žydais XVIII amžiuje, 115.

²² *Kovno or Kovna. The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. VII. New York – London, 1904, 567.

²³ Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno miesto santykių su žydais XVIII amžiuje, 123–141.



Kurovskaya (today Ožeškienės) Street. The cupola of the Kaunas Choral Synagogue is visible at left. 1885–1895. Photograph: Wactlaw Zatorski, NČDM

THE SCROLL OF KAUNAS

The conflict with the city was chronicled in a special text, the Scroll of Kaunas (*Megilat Kovno* in Hebrew), by Kaunas resident Samuel Hakatan. The scroll was recited ever year at the Kaunas Synagogue during the celebration of Purim. The text asserted that Jews had lived in Kaunas from ancient times and, when they were expelled from the city, that they found refuge in a suburb then located on the king's private estate. It recounted how a mob ransacked and destroyed their homes and synagogue. It praised the king's generosity and celebrated members of the community who had actively defended the rights of the brothers: Rabbi Moses from Kaunas and Vilijampolė and his brother Abraham,

sons of the rabbi Isaac Soloveichik, the builders of a synagogue in Vilijampolė.²⁴

After this symbolic Jewish victory in 1783, a celebration of Little Purim was declared in Kaunas, to be held every seventh day in the month of Adar.²⁵ The Scroll of Kaunas would be read aloud on that day every year.

²⁴ *Kovno or Kovna*, 567.

²⁵ Esther Shkalim. *A Mosaic of Israel's Traditions*. Jerusalem/New York, 2006, 182.



An example of the Scroll of Esther. The British Library, published under CC license

Adar (in leap years known as First or Second Adar) – corresponds to the month of February or March.

Purim (from the Hebrew word for “lots”) is one of the most joyous Jewish holidays, celebrated in the first month of spring (or the second month in leap years), on the 14th and 15th days of Adar, to commemorate the salvation of Jews from Persian persecution, events described in the Book of Esther. The story tells of the Jews’ rescue from Haman, an advisor to the Persian king, who sought to annihilate the Jewish population. The king’s wife, Esther, thwarted Haman’s plans and saved her people from destruction.

During Purim, the Book of Esther is recited in synagogues. This brief text, transcribed onto a separate scroll called a **megillah**, is bound in a decorative cover and read aloud from start to finish in the presence of the entire community. Children bring special rattles with them to the synagogue to make noise and drown out Haman’s name. The celebration’s rituals are meant to emphasize the unity of the Jewish

community: Gifts are given to the poor and festive meals are exchanged. There is no fasting observed during Purim and mourners may break their mourning on this day. Feasts are held, without much concern for perhaps overindulging in alcohol. There are stories of parody performances of sacred texts recited around the Purim table, such as “The Scroll of Purim, or the Drunkards’ Tales”. Carnival-like processions, or at least costume parades, are sometimes held on Purim.

In addition to other holidays on the Jewish calendar, some communities also celebrated the so-called **Little Purim** (*Purim Katan* in Hebrew), marking the miraculous salvation of a Jewish community from destruction. The dates for such celebrations differ according to location.²⁶

²⁶ Larisa Lempertienė. “Štai šventės Dievo...” Žydu šventės ir atminimo dienos. *Žydai Lietuvoje: istorija, kultūra, paveldas*. Ed. Larisa Lempertienė, Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, Vilnius, 2009.



The panorama of Vilijampolė, with the synagogue ruins at centre. 1920s. LCVA



Ruins of the Vilijampolė synagogue. 1920s. Wikimedia Commons

THE VILIJAMPOLĖ SYNAGOGUE

The date of the construction of the Vilijampolė Synagogue varies according to sources and may have occurred between 1772 and 1781. During a visit to the parish of Kaunas in 1782, Bishop Ignacy Jakub Massalski (Ignotas Jokūbas Masalskis) observed that:

*Jewish Slobodka is just outside the city, along the Neris River; more than 300 Jewish homes have been built there, along with a brick shkala [synagogue], constructed last year, with the permission of the most enlightened Prince [Karol] Radziwiłł, the voivode [local ruler or governor – Ed.] of Vilnius, and with the consent of His Eminence Prince Massalski, Bishop of Vilnius, in 1780.*²⁷

But the date most often cited in historiography for the synagogue's construction is 1772.

Vilijampolė (Slobodka) became a thriving community. As the community developed, it became necessary to build a synagogue. Rabbi Isaac Soloveichik was appointed a committee of one to find a proper site. He wasted no time. In short order a magnificent edifice had been erected on the slopes near the banks of the Viliya [Neris – Ed.] directly opposite the city of Kovno. The Christian populace watched with great curiosity as the new synagogue took shape. Its opening in 1772 only intensified their hatred of the Jews.

Shulamit Soloveitchik Meiselman²⁸

The following taxes were imposed on the kahal in 1795: 20 zloty for the synagogue; 60 for the Jewish cemetery; 5 zloty for the small hut by the cemetery; 14 zloty for the Jewish lantern [most likely meaning the menorah – Ed.], and 24 groszy for the Jewish meeting square. The kahal was required to pay for the protection of the synagogue from its own funds: pike poles and pumps had to be installed near the synagogue, and tubs and buckets placed by each house, and two persons had to be posted at night to watch for any fires.

1793 Vilijampolė Inventory²⁹



Ruins of the Vilijampolė synagogue. Early 1930s. Photograph: Zigmas Naujalis, archives of the Samogitian Diocese Museum

²⁷ Vyskupo Ignoto Jokūbo Masalskio Kauno dekanato vizitacija 1782 m. Lietuvos istorijos šaltiniai, t. 6, Ed. Vytautas Jogėla, Vilnius, 2001, 89.

²⁸ Shulamit Soloveitchik Meiselman. *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter's Memoir*. Hoboken, New Jersey, 1995, 42.

²⁹ 1793 m. Vilijampolės inventoriūs, l. 6.

JEWIS IN KAUNAS IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES



Jewish property in Kaunas in the late 18th and early 19th centuries [maps4u.lt](#)

SETTLING IN THE CITY

By the late 18th century, the state of the Jewish community in the city of Kaunas had changed little from what has already been described previously. The Constitution of May 3, 1791, established a poorly defined legal status for Jews within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In an instruction issued to towns within the district of Kaunas, Jews were defined as those “who may not be citizens of the town and who have already been segregated by law.”¹ Instructions for town residents emphasized that Jews must either be subject to the town government or they must not be recognized as having rights as town residents. In either case, this demonstrated a desire to limit any Jewish influence in urban areas.² But these instructions were not always followed: By the late 18th century, some Kaunas government representatives were already beginning to sell buildings to ethnically Jewish individuals.

1 Liudas Glemža. *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės miestų sąjūdis 1789–1792 metais*. Kaunas, 2010, 185.

2 Ibid., 185.

After the Third Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, the Kaunas City Magistrate appealed to the Governor of Vilnius requesting the apprehension of any Jews migrating to the city.³

On July 18, 1797, a new contract was registered in the Kaunas District Land Court between Vilijampolė residents A. and L. Soloveichik and the city’s elder Michał Pac:

The right to inhabit several plots of land within the aforementioned Elder’s [Castle] jurydyka in the city of Kaunas shall be ensured. They shall be entitled to keep taverns (Kaffenhaus) and maintain there any stores of hay, oats, and other necessities. For this tenancy the Soloveichiks shall pay a sum of 1,000 Polish zloty, to be paid in cash at the conclusion of this agreement. They shall also be required to submit two parcels of coffee and two parcels of sugar. ... The Soloveichiks must also deliver to my kitchens twelve

3 Rita Urbaitytė. Kauno miesto santykiai su žydais XVIII amžiuje, 145.

*suitably sized salmon each year until the expiration of this agreement. There are no clear boundaries separating the Elder’s jurydyka from the city. ... In accordance with this contract, the Soloveichiks are permitted to establish taverns and earn profit from residential tenants. ... Within the Elder’s jurydyka, the Soloveichiks are permitted to construct barns and silos. No other structures are permitted without my consent. In addition, by this contract I hereby grant rabbi Moses Izakovich the right to manage all affairs among residents within the jurydyka.*⁴

On August 17, 1797, the Court of the Governorate of Lithuania proclaimed that Jews may reside only in the Castle jurydyka and that they must abandon homes acquired from Christians if paid to do so by the magistrate or former residents.

Up to the mid-19th century, the city of Kaunas was settled within the area of what we know today as the Old Town. The city soon expanded to include Naujamiestis (New Town). The area known as Žaliakalnis (Green Hill) was annexed to the city in the late 19th century and then expanded in 1919 to include the remaining areas of Žaliakalnis as well as the neighborhoods of Vilijampolė and Žemieji (Lower) Šančiai.

Only three Jews resided in the city in 1734, living in brick homes belonging to the noblemen Derengowski and Bortkiewicz, and in a home owned by the noble Kulwinski family. All other Jews lived either on castle lands or on territory owned by the Church.

Tax records from 1796 indicate that eighteen homeowners had settled within the Castle jurydyka. The list specifically mentions one brick home belonging to Soloveichik and seven wooden homes and ten huts.⁵ One of the wooden buildings included a synagogue and ritual bath.

By the late 18th century, the territory of the Castle jurydyka had become too crowded for the Jewish community. An ever-larger portion of the community began to settle within the city proper. In 1796, Jews owned five homes in Kaunas, on Gaipetrio (Gaypiotrowska in the Polish spelling) and Vilija or Panerio (Powileyska) Streets. The merchant Soloveichik ran a boarding house and tavern and owned one brick home. A boarding house run by a Jewish owner named Chatzkel was located nearby. In addition to these buildings, Jews also owned smaller wooden buildings in the city,

4 LVIA, f. 162, ap. 1, b. 18.

5 1796 m. pusės dūmo mokesčių surinkimo registras. *KRVA*, f. I-61, ap. 1, b. 1, L. 275.

all of them concentrated within an area near the Neris River, not far from the Castle jurydyka and the bridge to Vilijampolė.

Jews acquired both wooden and brick buildings in different sections of Kaunas (see table), including around the prestigious City Hall Square.⁶

| Year | Number of buildings |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Prior to 1795 | 2 |
| 1795–1799 | 7 |
| 1800–1804 | 13 |
| 1804–1811 | 15 |
| 1812–1816 | 13 |
| 1816–1831 | 19 |
| 1831–1835 | 20 |
| 1836–1841 | 14 |
| Unspecified | 9 |
| Total buildings: | 112 |

Jewish real estate holdings in 1795–1841.⁷

Despite their acquisition of numerous buildings, Jewish residential occupancy remained quite dense. Some apartments and smaller homes were inhabited by several persons – very often these were Jews who had arrived in Kaunas after leaving their homes or being driven out of other countries, forced to work in meagre trade or occasional employment.⁸

6 1841 m. gruodžio 6 d. Kauno dūmos ataskaita Vilniaus gubernatoriui A. Semionovui. *LVIA*, f. 381, ap. 10, b. 7678, l. 52.

7 Kauno magistrato 1841 m. sąrašas apie žydus, apsigyvenusius Kaune nuo 1798 m. *LVIA*, f. 381, ap. 10, b. 7678, l. 13–30.

8 Remigijus Civinskas. Kauno žydų integracija į miestiečių luomą: caro valdžios žydų politikos stereotipai ir miestietiškas mentalitetas 1795–1844 metais. *Darbai ir Dienos*, t. 28, Kaunas, 2001, 55–66.

ATTEMPTS TO ANNEX VILIJAMPOLĖ TO KAUNAS

Discussions regarding the annexation of Vilijampolė to the city of Kaunas began in the 1810s. Such plans and the ensuing conflict over them were driven by the unequal tax policies imposed in Kaunas and Vilijampolė in the early 19th century.

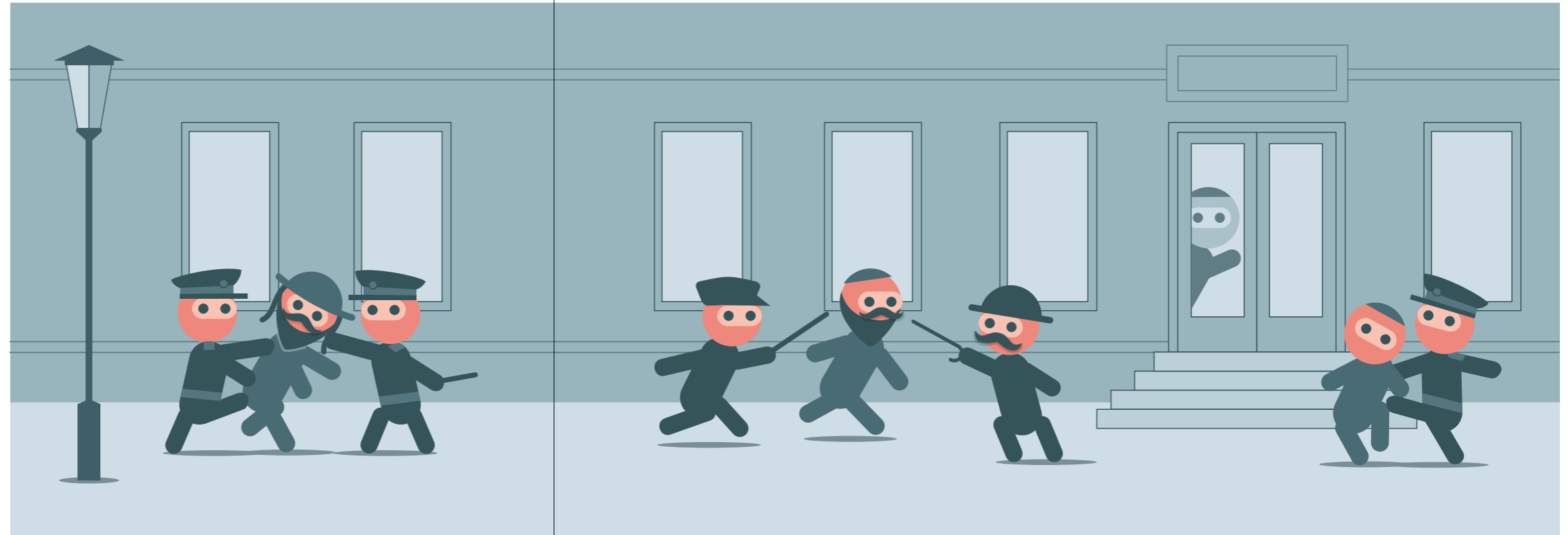
A beverage sales tax and patent fee were introduced in Kaunas in 1810. No such tax existed in Vilijampolė at the time because its inhabitants paid considerably lower taxes to the estate holder. In other words, Kaunas merchants, residents, and Jews had a much harder time competing with traders in Vilijampolė. Peasants and noblemen arriving in Kaunas could remain in the taverns of Vilijampolė and never cross the Neris River or visit the city's markets and shops. As a result, the Kaunas Duma sought to impose the same taxes on residents of Vilijampolė.

Initially, the Vilnius Governorate (to which Kaunas then belonged) avoided any consideration of the new taxes, since Vilijampolė was a privately organized town. But by 1811, by an order of the Governor General of Vilnius that contradicted Russian law, Vilijampolė was subjected to beverage sales taxes and patent fees. The Jews of Vilijampolė objected to this form of dual taxation. In 1812, however, after the outbreak of war with Napoleon, the issue took on secondary importance.

City residents took advantage of the war and issued an appeal to generals and military commanders in 1812. They then wrote to the Vilnius Governor General, asserting that Slobodka in Vilijampolė be annexed to the city.⁹ This proposal was even presented to the Russian Imperial Senate for consideration. The integration of Vilijampolė into Kaunas proper was begun in 1812, with the imposition of police control over the district. Vilijampolė Jews were required to collect a tax for the town's maintenance and thereby reduce the financial burden borne by the citizens of Kaunas.

In 1815, the Kaunas Duma once again resumed consideration of Vilijampolė's annexation to Kaunas and the taxation of its Jewish residents to fulfill their obligations to the state. Officials in the Vilnius Governorate conducted a thorough legal analysis of the matter and decided to reject the appeal. Vilijampolė retained its

⁹ Vilniaus gubernijos valdybos įsakas Kauno dūmai. KRVA, f. I-61, ap. 2, b. 103, l.18–25.



status as a small private town in which Jewish life and certain tax conditions were to be determined by the owners and rulers of the estate.

Kaunas city police continued to maintain order within the town. This fact, along with the cultural (social, ethnic, and religious) ties existing between Kaunas and the Jews of Vilijampolė, led to the area being commonly referred to as a suburb of Kaunas.

VIOLENCE AGAINST JEWS

Violence against subordinates was one of several means by which the country was governed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Urban populations often endured state-sanctioned violence as a result of their frequent encounters with armies (at the hands of military units stationed in or armies frequently marching through urban

centers) or concentrations of police forces. Physical coercion was most often directed at individuals from the lowest classes and social groups: city dwellers, Jews, free farmers, etc. In addition, violence against Jews was often driven by domestic antisemitism and the attitudes of some Russian soldiers.

In 1801, Kaunas Jews led by merchant Abraham Chaimovich wrote an appeal to the Kaunas Magistrate:

Stankiewicz, the senior aide to the captain of the Buranowski company, arrived in Kaunas not to enlist new recruits, but began apprehending Jews in the street and taking them by force to the commandant's office. Later, they came upon the merchant A. Chaimovich on his way to the guild and beat him severely.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Reise nach Petersburg, oder historisch-politische Nachrichten über Russland, auf einer Gesandtschaftsreise gesammelt von dem Grafen Frottier de la Messeliere, und bis zum Jahre 1802 fortgesetzt von Musset-Pathay.* Leipzig, 1803.

A well-known chronicler of his travels at the time, Johann Gottfried Seume, stopped in Kaunas in May 1805 to change horses and later described his impressions of the city.

If the citizens, as must be confessed, sometimes carry matters too far, yet is the proud barbarous oppressive authority of the military in Russia, more than in other states, a deeply rooted malady. ... The military authority treats the municipality, especially in small towns, with so much rigor and debasing rudeness, that every feeling of honor and justice is annihilated.



Napoleon's army crossing the Nemunas at Kaunas in 1812. Lithograph by Charles Motte. Early 19th century. Private collection

THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN WAR OF 1812

Napoleon's army entered Kaunas on June 24, 1812. War with the Russian Empire had begun. Carl von Martens, a participant in that war, later wrote about the events:

Bonfires still burned on City Hall Square and furniture was carried out of homes and windows broken. The occasional Jew could still be seen here and there. One glance was enough to see that everything had changed. The city of Kaunas had been completely ransacked.¹¹

Kaunas lost many of its inhabitants during the war, with a great number dying from violence or disease or choosing to flee the city. Some seventy buildings were burned or abandoned.

Jewish migration into Kaunas accelerated after the 1812 War. In 1819, a traveler named Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz wrote a description of Kaunas at the time:

This is how I found Kaunas. ... Collapsing towers and homes in some places, reminders of the city's former grandeur. By every gate, a Jew watches from a tavern ... What was once a great city is but a deplorable little town with 260 buildings and a suburb on the other side of the Viliya where the Jews live and not a single Christian can be found. It was like the times of Athaliah when they worshipped the god Baal. Jews still sell grain in the city itself. There are only two Christian merchants: Rejs and Kaloff. But they've abandoned real commerce and now merely 'play' at it, making and selling mead.¹²

¹¹ Cited from Dariusz Nawrot. *Didžioji Armija Kaune ir jo apylinkėse 1812 m. birželį. Kauno istorijos metraštis*, t. 13, Kaunas, 2013, 80–81.

¹² *Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza Podróże historyczne po ziemisch polskich między rokiem 1811 a 1828 odbyte*. Paryż, 1858, s. 370.

JEWES AND THE KAUNAS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In the early 19th century, the integration of Jews as city dwellers was pursued inconsistently. Very often, Jews were only formally designated as city residents. Policies advanced by the Russian government failed to remove any of the obstacles to Jewish social integration into the city's population, meaning that Jews continued to be barred from participating in local city government.

The Kaunas Duma established in 1808, meant to include representatives of all the city's groups and classes, was in reality merely a council representing the urban and trading elites with limited capacity for actual independent action. After the adoption in 1835 of the so-called "Jewish Provisions", a document regulating the position of Jews within the Russian Empire, Jews earned the right to participate in the work of the local duma. Kaunas Jews appealed to Vilnius Governor General Nikolai Dolgorukov, asking for permission to participate in elections.¹³ But in its response to the military governor, the Kaunas Duma explained that the election of Jews to the duma and city magistrate's office would violate privileges then applicable within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth:

Jews must not be allowed to be elected because they may then take power from the Christians. What's more, Jews have no morals and are completely unsuited to work as judges. ... The Jewish religion fosters hatred against all Christians in Kaunas. ... The people of the city of Kaunas graciously ask for protection from the Jews, who use deception and economic measures to turn Christians into their servants.¹⁴

The government in St. Petersburg nevertheless ruled against making any exceptions and allowed Jews to select counselors to the Kaunas Duma. In early 1836, they elected Rubinstein as a Duma counsellor.

An economic crisis began in some parts of the Russian Empire in the late 1830s and Jews were blamed for it. In an effort to reduce the autonomy of Jewish communities, Emperor Nikolai I ordered the Russian State Duma to undertake new Jewish reforms.

¹³ 1835 m. rugpjūčio 7 d. Kauno kahalų vyresniųjų raštas Vilniaus kariniam gubernatoriui N. Dogorukovui. *LVA*, f. 381, ap. 10, b. 3129, l. 2.

¹⁴ 1835 m. rugpjūčio 10 d. Kauno dūmos raportas Vilniaus kariniam gubernatoriui N. Dogorukovui. *LVA*, f. 381, ap. 10, b. 3129, l. 10.

These reforms were begun in Lithuania in 1845. The Kaunas kahal was disbanded that same year.¹⁵

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL POLICY: "USEFUL" AND "USELESS" JEWS

According to the outline for planned reforms, the Russian state sought to implement two courses of action: improving Jewish morals and religion and integrating Jews into society. In addition to efforts aimed at assimilation and integration, the reform program also included economic measures meant to restructure a segment of Jewish economic activity.

After passing a law to abolish all kahal, the Russian government began preparing for the "categorization" of Jews as either "useful" or "useless", promoting a plan meant to integrate Jews into different segments of imperial society. The classification program called for assigning Jews to one of three urban groups (city dwellers, merchants, and guildsmen) or placing them in the rural category. There was also to be a group of so-called "useless" Jews – those lacking any profession, property, or membership in any crafts guild.

Some Jews were to be retrained as farmers and were provided plots on state-owned land. But to the surprise of even the Russian government itself, by the spring of 1845 thousands of Lithuanian Jews had submitted petitions asking to work as farmers. The number of Kaunas Jews among these petitioners was small.¹⁶ In 1847–1848, several hundred future farmers from Kaunas and the surrounding governorate made their way to the Kherson Governorate (today the Dnipropetrovsk District of Ukraine) and founded Novi Kovna, or New Kaunas.

Despite the reforms, the Kaunas Jewish community preserved its conditional autonomy. A self-regulating Jewish tax community was established on the basis of the former Kaunas kahal, essentially replacing an old entity with a new one. Russian policy had little impact on the Jewish community's economic activity. It did, however, spur the creation of Jewish artisan guilds in Kaunas.

¹⁵ 1845 m. birželio 19 d. Kauno policmeisterio ataskaita Kauno gubernijos valdybai. *KAA*, f. I-61, ap. 1, b. 1374, l. 45.

¹⁶ 1850 m. rugsėjo 28 d. Vilkių žydų bendruomenės raštas Kauno dūmai; 1850 m. rugsėjo 20 d. Kauno žydų bendruomenės deputatų raportas Kauno dūmai. *KAA*, f. I-61, ap. 2, b. 1433, l. 4; l. 13.



A view of Vilijampolė. 1930s. LCVA

THE IDEA FOR A JEWISH QUARTER

Jews spread through the city like a flood and, resorting to all sorts of tricks, took control of more than one hundred Christian homes.

Kaunas Magistrate document, 1842¹⁷

Archival documents from the late 18th and early 19th centuries provide a fairly accurate picture of growing Jewish population trends in Kaunas, but they are not reliable enough sources for determining the precise size of the Jewish population in the city. Over a period of more than forty years, from 1795 to 1841, the number of Jews in Kaunas grew from a few hundred to nearly two thousand.

A new conflict between Jews and Christians broke out in Kaunas in 1842–1843. City residents flooded the institutions of the Vilnius Governorate with complaints and proposals to expel Jews

from Kaunas. Eventually, the administration of the newly established Kaunas Governorate took up consideration of the issue in 1843. After Kaunas became the administrative center of the new governorate, the drafting of a new city plan began. In 1844, while a decision on the matter was still pending, planners looked to the future: “If Jews are destined to remain in this city, then plans should envision the designation of a remote quarter to which they might be relocated. . . . A site for the Jewish suburb should be found on the banks of the Neris River.”¹⁸ A Jewish quarter was to be located approximately within the area between present-day Varnių and Kleboniškių bridges, at Jonava Street.

It was soon noticed that a greater portion of this area was always inundated during spring floods, while the remaining area would not be sufficient for all Jewish inhabitants. As a result, several versions of the plan were drafted in 1846, allocating three

17 LVIA, f. 381, ap. 10, b. 7678, l. 7.

18 1844 m. rugsėjo 23 d. raštas. LVIA, f. 378, ap. BS1843, b. 1840, l. 24–25.



Mid-19th century plan for the city of Kaunas

small sections for Jewish residents.¹⁹ According to one option, the boundaries of the Jewish quarter were to have run along present-day Miško, Gedimino, and K. Donelaičio Streets and Vytauto Prospektas. Another plan option called for a Jewish quarter to be established in what is today known as Ramybės Park, the former Kaunas city cemetery, in place of the cemetery then planned for Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Tatars.

In December 1846, the Russian Imperial government decided to allow Jews who already owned their own homes to remain in Kaunas and granted them the right to dispose of their property as they wished and required that any buildings be restricted to

brick construction. Those unable to replace old wooden structures with brick homes had to relocate to a new suburb, where newly registered Jews were also permitted to settle.²⁰

All restrictions were abolished in March 1858, when Russian Emperor Alexander II issued a decree allowing Jews to purchase and build homes and settle anywhere in Kaunas.²¹

20 1846 m. gruodžio 10 d. nutartis nr. 20693. *Полное собрание законов Российской империи*, т. 21, с. 641.

21 1858 m. kovo 27 d. nutartis nr. 32921. *Полное собрание законов Российской империи*, т. 33, с. 358.

19 1846 rugsėjo 28 d. raštas. LVIA, f. 378, ap. BS1843, b. 1840, l. 106.

JEWES IN KAUNAS IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES



Zalman Bagriansky and his wife. Kaunas. Late 19th century. Photograph: Waclaw Zatorski, USHMM

To the limited extent I knew Kovno during that time, the city seemed to me to be the largest city in the world. The factories of Chatzkel Joffe, Simcha Anronovitch, Zalkin Eliase (the father of the 'Baal Machshoves'), Rabinovitch's iron shop . . . and others – such stores were like large enterprises to me. Of course, there were also small shops and booths in the fish market, the potato market, and the surrounding alleyways. However, according to my conception, these were poor shops, despite the fact that the owners of the larger shops were also not great wealthy people, as I later came to realize. Such householders, who would come to the Butcher's Kloiz on Sabbaths and festivals wearing top hats, left the impression upon me as being very wealthy individuals.

Frank Epstein¹

Kaunas and its Jewish community grew rapidly in the latter half of the 19th century. In the 1850s, the city had some 23,000 inhabitants, including more than 12,000 Jews – more than half the city's population. In later decades, this proportion continued to grow. By the late 1860s, the population of Kaunas had reached 32,000, of which slightly more than 20,000 were Jews. In the early 1870s, of 44,000 inhabitants, 28,000 Kaunas residents were Jews – nearly two thirds of the city's population.

More precise data on the size of Kaunas' population and its ethnic composition were obtained during a universal census of the Russian Empire conducted in 1897. That year, Kaunas had 70,920 inhabitants, of which 25,441 were Jews (based on declared religion). Because the census included the Kaunas fortress garrison, numbering several thousand inhabitants, within the overall population, the city's ethnic makeup was slightly distorted: The Jewish community was reported to comprise only 36% of the population, less than the actual proportion.

Prior to the First World War, Kaunas had slightly more than 32,000 Jewish inhabitants, out of a total prewar population of approximately 83,000.

¹ Frank Epstein. *Reminiscences of Kaunas. Lite (Lithuania)*. Ed. Mendel Sudarsky and Uriah Katzenelenbogen, New York, 1951, 1193. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lita/Lit1191.html>

19. Gyventojų skaičius Kaune 1928 – 1937 m. gruodžio mėn. 31 d. tautybėmis.
Nombre d'habitants à Kaunas au 31 décembre 1928 – 1937, suivant la nationalité.

| Metai Années | Lietuvių Lithuaniens | | Žydų Juifs | | Vokiečių Allemands | | Lenkų Polonais | | Rusų Russes | | Kitų Autres | | Viso Total | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------|---------------|------|-----------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|----------------|-----|----------------|-----|---------------|-----|
| | abs. | % | abs. | % | abs. | % | abs. | % | abs. | % | abs. | % | abs. | % |
| 1937 | 66.146 | 61,1 | 27.580 | 25,5 | 3.613 | 3,3 | 4.218 | 3,9 | 3.544 | 3,3 | 3.095 | 2,9 | 108.196 | 100 |
| 1936 | 65.017 | 60,9 | 27.408 | 25,6 | 3.579 | 3,4 | 4.235 | 4,0 | 3.502 | 3,3 | 3.053 | 2,8 | 106.794 | 100 |
| 1935 | 63.805 | 60,6 | 27.301 | 25,9 | 3.567 | 3,4 | 4.253 | 4,0 | 3.445 | 3,3 | 2.999 | 2,8 | 105.370 | 100 |
| 1934 | 62.712 | 60,3 | 27.181 | 26,1 | 3.542 | 3,4 | 4.271 | 4,1 | 3.402 | 3,3 | 2.930 | 2,8 | 104.038 | 100 |
| 1933 | 61.725 | 60,1 | 27.012 | 26,3 | 3.528 | 3,4 | 4.292 | 4,2 | 3.346 | 3,2 | 2.847 | 2,8 | 102.750 | 100 |
| 1932 | 60.450 | 59,8 | 26.765 | 26,5 | 3.501 | 3,5 | 4.304 | 4,3 | 3.271 | 3,2 | 2.774 | 2,7 | 101.065 | 100 |
| 1931 | 59.354 | 59,6 | 26.543 | 26,7 | 3.455 | 3,5 | 4.305 | 4,3 | 3.182 | 3,2 | 2.691 | 2,7 | 99.530 | 100 |
| 1930 | 58.444 | 59,4 | 26.351 | 26,8 | 3.456 | 3,5 | 4.305 | 4,4 | 3.128 | 3,2 | 2.646 | 2,7 | 98.330 | 100 |
| 1929 | 57.682 | 59,3 | 26.224 | 27,0 | 3.448 | 3,5 | 4.304 | 4,4 | 3.089 | 3,2 | 2.570 | 2,6 | 97.317 | 100 |
| 1928 | 57.156 | 59,2 | 26.050 | 27,0 | 3.435 | 3,5 | 4.308 | 4,5 | 3.043 | 3,2 | 2.543 | 2,6 | 96.535 | 100 |

The population of Kaunas according to ethnicity.²

After the declaration of Lithuanian independence on February 16, 1918, the size of the Jewish population settled between 25,000 and 27,000.

Only G-d alone knows how the Jews of Kovno earned their livelihoods during those days. If faith means living, if reciting Psalms, praying three times a day, fasting on the fast days, and complaining about the Jewish fate means living – Jews in Kovno in that era lived a broad life. To make the Sabbath, one had to borrow on credit. During the week, one would survive by talking about eating. Of course, there were also Jews who had an abundant livelihood. However, one could count them.

There were not very many wealthy people in Kovno. Even the strongest businessmen would live more from IOUs than from cash. The majority of the Jews earned their livelihood by transporting packages, carrying water, driving rafts, shoemaking, tailoring, and a variety of other trades. The Jews who conducted business in the market with old dresses, rope, resin, clay utensils, fish, and herring also did not have sufficient bread to satisfy their families.

Frank Epstein³

² Kauno statistikos metraštis, 1939 m.

³ Frank Epstein. *Reminiscences of Kaunas. Lite (Lithuania)*, 1193.

CHANGES IN CLOTHING STYLES

Clothing has played an important role in Jewish communities for centuries and has reflected religious identity, social status, and even one's emotional state. Jews in the Russian Empire wore their own style of clothing that differed from other communities around them – a practice for which Jewish kahals were required to pay a small fee.

But in 1845, the Tsarist government decided to abolish different clothing customs. A special tax was imposed on Jews availing themselves of the right to wear their own clothing. The Tsar granted a five-year “privilege” to the Jews of Lithuania, but by 1850 everyone was required to wear “European clothing”. Those who agreed to forgo special clothing were exempted from any additional tax. In 1847, the governorate rulers reminded the city council of its obligation to monitor whether Jews were indeed paying the tax imposed on their clothing.

The newly introduced tax became a burden for poor Jews. In appeals sent to the Tsar, Jews complained that the new tax was too burdensome for the poor members of their community who couldn't afford to quickly change their wardrobe. They asked that the government preserve the old system and collect taxes from the kahals rather than individuals. But the government not only refused to lift its order, it also increased the tax. A fee was charged for the right to wear shawls and kippahs.⁴

That same year, some Jews in Kaunas informed the city council that they had renounced wearing Jewish clothing and asked to be exempted from the clothing tax. The first to do so was a group of ten Kaunas merchants: H. Neviazhsky, H. and S. Volpe, B. Weinstein, P. Kadison, M. Rabinovich, F. Varshavchik, E. Ginsburg, G. Rumshisky, and D. Levin.

The Tsarist official Andrey Pavlovich Subbotin, who wrote about his impressions of Kaunas in 1888, noted that the old section of Kaunas, with its narrow streets, tightly huddled houses, and a multitude of shops, was largely inhabited by Jews. The core of the city's society would congregate on Nikolai Prospekt (today Laisvės Alėja), while on Saturdays one could see many Israelites

walking the avenue, dressed in European clothing, much like on Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg or on Tverskoy Boulevard in Moscow on holy days.⁵

Written accounts recorded by travelers in the latter half of the 19th century reflect the antisemitic atmosphere of the times and the authors' views about Jewish appearances. A travel account was published in a London magazine in 1861, noting that Kaunas was inhabited by “bearded Jews – dirty, miserable-looking thieves.”⁶ Several years later, the Baptist missionary Johann Oncken also wrote: “On our arrival in Kowno, we were surrounded by a swarm of dirty Jews in tattered garments, offering to carry us in their wretched drosky [carriages] to the railway station.”⁷

Similar attitudes prevailed in later texts, for example in the memoirs of an Italian diplomat and journalist recorded in the early 20th century:

These days, if one wants to encounter in Kaunas a fellow countryman of the Jews who bustle around the ghettos of Vilnius and Warsaw (with long, faded coats, and unkempt hair falling over greasy collars), one has to visit the Old Town or the suburb of Vilijampolė. Here, on the contrary, a commendable competition between two social groups has been rekindled, particularly among women. It is impossible to discern whether the female body beneath an elegant fur coat belongs to a baptized or unbaptized woman. Only an experienced traveler can recognize either type of people by their facial features or color, if they weren't concealed by makeup that masks the pigmentation that Mother Nature has endowed to these two races, and by their hair, which for the Lithuanian women is usually blonde, and for Jewish women – dark.”⁸

The differences in clothing worn by Lithuanian Jews were intriguingly described by Alton Goldblum during a visit to his relatives in 1900, accompanied by his mother, who had emigrated from Lithuania. He first described his grandfather on his father's

5 Андрей Павлович Субботин. *В черте еврейской оседлости*. Санкт-Петербург, 1888, с. 108–109.

6 Bear Shooting in Russia, *Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, Vol. 2, London, October 1860 – April 1861, 137–138.

7 Mr. Oncken's Visit to St. Petersburg, *The Missionary Magazine*, Vol. 45, Boston, 1865, 178.

8 Džuzepė Salvatoris. *Lietuva vakar ir šiandien*. Kaunas, 1992.

4 1845 m. kovo 12 d. Kauno gubernatoriaus raštas dėl žydų tradicinių rūbų dėvėjimo apmokestinimo. *KRVA*, f. I-61, ap. 2, b. 1017, l. 1; 1848 vasario 11 d. Žydų jarmulkų dėvėjimo apmokestinimo įsakas. *KRVA*, f. I-61, ap. 2, b. 1017, l. 62.



Jews wearing tallits during prayer. Early 20th century postcard from Eastern Europe. mannbarry.net



The Lifshitz family on Laisvės Alėja, Kaunas. 1932. Yad Vashem Archives

side, who lived in Naujamiestis: “My grandfather was a tall, thin man with white hair and an unkempt white beard who dressed in the Russian manner: cap, *rubashka*, and high boots up to his knees into which his trouser legs were tucked.”⁹ Goldblum and his mother later traveled to Kaunas, where they were met by her brother and two of her sisters:

The contrast was striking. The two aunts were young women in their teens. They wore the conventional European dress, they were

*gymnasistkes [high school students – Ed.], which meant that they had at least a secondary education, they knew Russian, Polish, Yiddish, Lithuanian, and German, besides some Hebrew, and their bearing was aristocratic. My uncle . . . was a gentleman. A waxed moustache, otherwise clean shaven, perfumed and well tonsured, silver-headed walking stick, fine-fitting clothes, and a portly bearing made him a not-undistinguished man. He was a man of the world with a cosmopolitan outlook, although he had never been out of Kovno.*¹⁰

⁹ Alton Goldblum. *Small Patients: The Autobiography of a Children's Doctor*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.



Dina, Abraham and Zelda Girnun. Laisvės Alėja, Kaunas. 1930s. Yad Vashem Archives

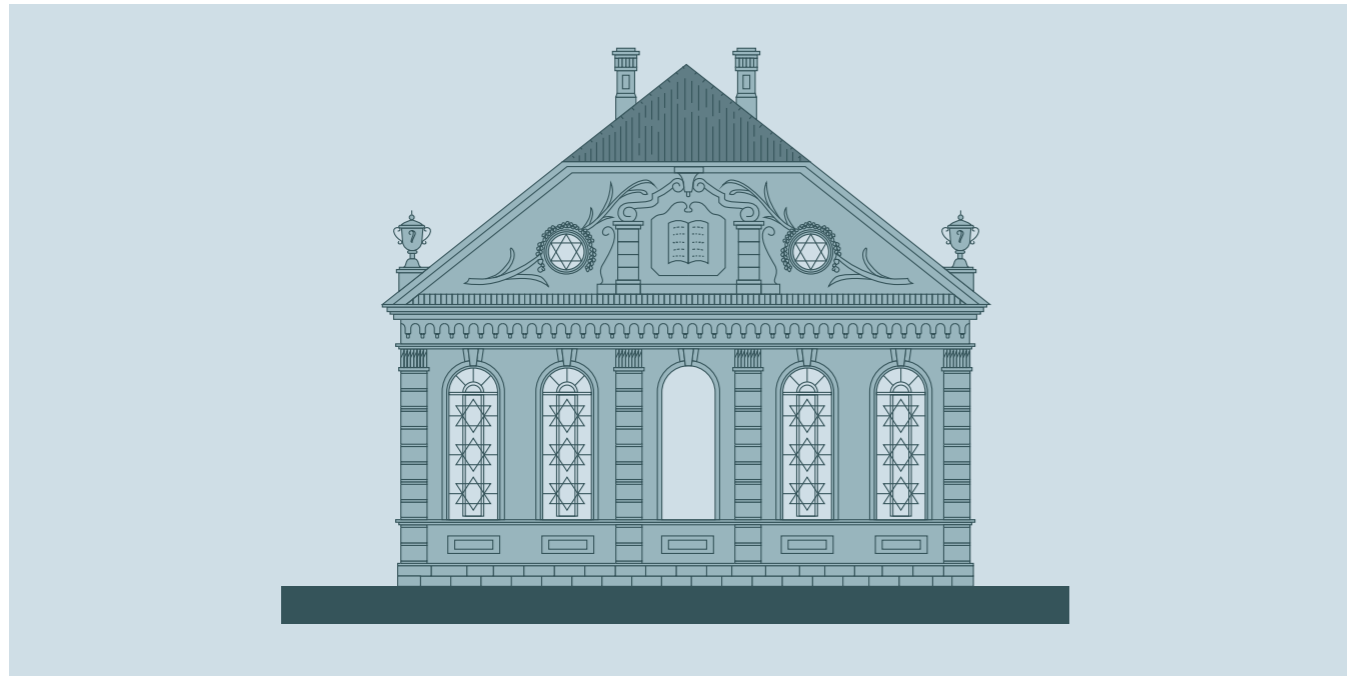


Lina, Chaja and Michael Kapulsky. Laisvės Alėja, Kaunas. 1930s. Yad Vashem Archives

kippah (from the Hebrew for “dome” or “covering”) – a small cap worn by men to cover their head. A kippah is worn always and everywhere, except when sleeping. In synagogues, during prayer, or while eating or studying religious texts, men usually wear a kippah to cover their head to pay respect to God. Women cover their heads with scarves. Kippahs also help identify a person’s religious or social affiliation. Orthodox Jews wear black, usually larger, sewn kippahs, while Zionists and nationalists wear smaller crocheted white and blue colored caps.

kittel – a long robe (white for everyday use, black for ceremonial purposes) worn during high holidays and rituals.

tallit (from the Hebrew word for a square piece of fabric) – a white ritual cloak with black or blue stripes worn by men under their clothing, with fringes or tassels known as **tzitzit** that hang out from beneath one’s clothing. A tallit is usually worn during morning prayer, on Yom Kippur, and during certain other ceremonies. It is considered a holy item, usually received as a gift at weddings, bar mitzvahs, or graduation from religious studies.



The synagogue of Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein at the corner of Vežėjų and Stiklių Streets in Vilijampolė. Drawing based on design sketches prepared in 1926 held by KRVA.

SYNAGOGUES AND HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Synagogues were the center of Jewish community life and were meant for study, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings. They were the main and largest houses of worship. Smaller Jewish religious buildings were known as *shuls*. These were dedicated not only to religious worship, but also for study, since, in Judaism, learning and prayer are inseparable.¹¹

A registry of houses of worship compiled in 1880 listed twenty-three synagogues and prayer houses in Kaunas and twelve in Vilijampolė.¹² It was asserted that some houses of prayer and synagogues, such as the Old Synagogue and that belonging to the descendants of the Rapoport family, had existed since ancient times. More precise completion dates were listed for houses of

worship constructed in the mid-19th century, including: Kadison (1849); Hirsh Neviazhsky (1849); Mėsininkų (Butchers') Street, (1851); and the Hasidic Synagogue (1852).

Permission was granted to build the Ohel Yakov Choral Synagogue in 1872. A design for the building was drafted that same year by Kaunas Governorate engineer Ustin Golinevich. The synagogue was built as a gift to the community from the merchant Levin Minkovski. But construction was delayed due to a shortage of funds, and while the synagogue began operating in 1874, it remained incomplete and was opened with a temporary wooden slat roof. The synagogue's most important area, the *aron kodesh*, was transferred over from the old synagogue. Funds were only found for a new aron kodesh and major renovations in 1883, which saw the installation of a permanent, metal roof.¹³

¹¹ Nijolė Lukšionytė-Tolvaišienė. *Kauno pastatai. Žydų kultūros paveldas Lietuvoje*. Ed. Alfredas Jomantas, Vilnius, 2005, 72.

¹² 1880 m. Kauno ir Vilijampolės žydų maldos namų sąrašas. *KRVA*, f. I-61, ap. 2, b. 5761, l. 253–256.

¹³ 1883 m. kovo 12 d. Kauno gubernatoriaus raštas. *LVA*, f. 378, ap. BS1883, b. 576, l. 1–5.



A rendering of the aron kodesh at the Kaunas Choral Synagogue. A copy of this aron kodesh is on display in the United States at the Virginia Holocaust Museum's Choral Synagogue Auditorium.

Concerts first began to be held in the Choral Synagogue in 1892, featuring cantor R. Rabinovich and a 24-member choir, accompanied by a string orchestra and a harmonium performing music by Haydn, Handel, Mendelssohn, and other composers. One such concert was reported in the Kaunas press: “The cantor’s voice was pleasant, the orchestration was beautiful, and the well-rehearsed choir was in perfect harmony. The synagogue was completely full. There were many non-Jews in the audience as well.”¹⁴

Religiously observant Jews rarely took part in public life and instead dedicated themselves to prayer and the study of religious texts.

I was born in the year 1855, in the town of Kovno. My parents were pious Jews, much devoted to the glory of God under the Jewish traditions. My father fasted every Monday and Thursday. . . . When I was five years of age, my father began to instruct me in Hebrew, that I might read the prayers of the Liturgy every morning, afternoon, and evening, and informed me that if I did what the rabbi wished and obeyed him in all things, also prayed three times a day, God would be very pleased with me.

The idea that God would be very pleased sank deep into my heart. I tried to do everything that my parents, and especially my rabbi, wished me to do. . . . When eight years of age, I could read any part in the Hebrew Bible. My rabbi began also to instruct me in the Talmud. My whole time was devoted to studying with him in his house.

Isaac Levinsohn¹⁵

Like all Jewish boys at the age of thirteen, I prepared for my bar mitzvah, the acceptance of new members by the community and the “new man’s” first public reading of the Torah.

With a bar mitzvah – which, literally translated means “son of the [divine] law” – one is obligated to accept all the commandments and be responsible for one’s own actions. For this reason, the boy’s father also says a prayer on the occasion, in which he divests himself of any responsibility for his son’s wrongdoing. According to Jewish tradition, this undertaking of the Law is eternal and irreversible, similar to the obligation of a son toward his father, which is also not to be broken. The first duty to perform is the reading of “Hear, O Israel” in

the evening prayer. The second duty is the wearing of phylacteries (leather boxes containing scriptural passages worn on the left arm and the head during morning prayers, also called tefillin), and being called to the Torah in the synagogue.

Zev Birger¹⁶

My own family was among the poorer ones in Slobodka. My father was a teacher of children: His were the advanced subjects of the Bible and Talmud, but his income was far too meager for the adequate support of a family of eight – my parents, my grandmother, my three sisters, my brother, and myself. Our home consisted of a single chamber without a wooden floor. The earth was covered with sand every week. This room had to serve as kitchen, dining room, dormitory, and parlor. Our food was of the plainest, usually potatoes or barley. We often, but by no means always, had meat on Sabbaths and festivals. But there were always two tiny loaves of white bread for such days; they were needed for the prescribed blessings. My father, in his devotion to his children, would usually give them his share of the meat: “They require it to grow”, he would say. But he kept the white bread for himself, and the children ate black bread even on the Sabbath. When my brother on one occasion complained of this, my father said simply: “When you are a father, you, too, will have white bread.”

Simon Finkelstein¹⁷

But some Jews in Kaunas gave up old traditions and chose to assimilate in the hopes of taking advantage of the privileges offered by the Russian Empire to gain rights equal to those enjoyed by other city residents.

The Sabbath was no longer kept holy, nor did it disturb the passion for business. The wife, clinging tenaciously to the traditions, used to light the Sabbath candles, but her enlightened husband lit his cigarette. He invited his friends for cards. The kiddush cup filled with wine stood on the table, but no one touched it; it had become a symbol. Only the peppered stuffed fish remained. Apostasy did not go so far as to banish that from the Friday evening meal. Instead of Sabbath songs, there were jokes and anecdotes.

Pauline Wengeroff¹⁸

¹⁶ Zev Birger. *No Time for Patience. My Road from Kaunas to Jerusalem. A Memoir of a Holocaust Survivor*. Newmarket Press, New York, 1999, 21.

¹⁷ Spiritual Autobiography of Simon J. Finkelstein. *American Spiritual Autobiographies*, 3.

¹⁸ Pauline Wengeroff. *Memoirs of a Grandmother. The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*. Ed. Lucy S. Dawidowicz. Boston, Beacon Press, 1968, 164.

¹⁴ Прибавление к Ковенским губернским ведомостям, 1892, № 91, с. 2.

¹⁵ Isaac Levinsohn. *The Story of Isaac Levinsohn, a Polish Jew*, Told by Himself. London, 1891, 2.

aron kodesh (Hebrew for “holy ark”): a niche in a synagogue’s eastern wall for storing Torah scrolls.

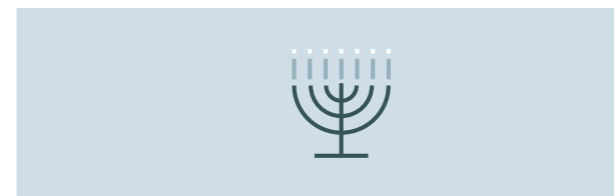
bar mitzvah (from Hebrew, meaning “son of the commandment”): (1) religious coming of age (at 13), granting Jewish boys all rights and obligations as members of the religious community; (2) a boy who has reached religious adulthood.

beth midrash (Hebrew for “house of learning”): a synonym for a house of prayer or synagogue.

goy (Hebrew for “nation” or “people”): a word used by Jews when referring to believers of other faiths.

heder (from Hebrew, meaning “room”): a private primary religious school for boys.

kloyz (Yiddish for “enclosed space”): a small, informal space for prayer, a synagogue serving certain community groups.



menorah (Hebrew for “candelabrum” or “lantern”): a candelabrum with seven branches, made from gold, silver, bronze, or other metal and decorated with geometric patterns or plant, animal, or heraldic motifs. The menorah is also one of the oldest symbols in Judaism. It adorns Jewish temples, gravestones, ritual accessories, etc. It symbolizes a radiant tree and its relation to the universe (seven planets, seven heavens). A menorah is depicted on the national emblem of the State of Israel.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lijana Šatavičiūtė. *Menora*. Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija. <https://www.vle.lt/PaieskosRezultatai/search/menora>

midrash (Hebrew for “exposition” or “interpretation”): (1) a method and genre of Biblical commentary developed by religious authorities in the post-Biblical era; (2) a collection of commentary corresponding to this method; (3) a commentary on a specific section of the Bible, based on this method.

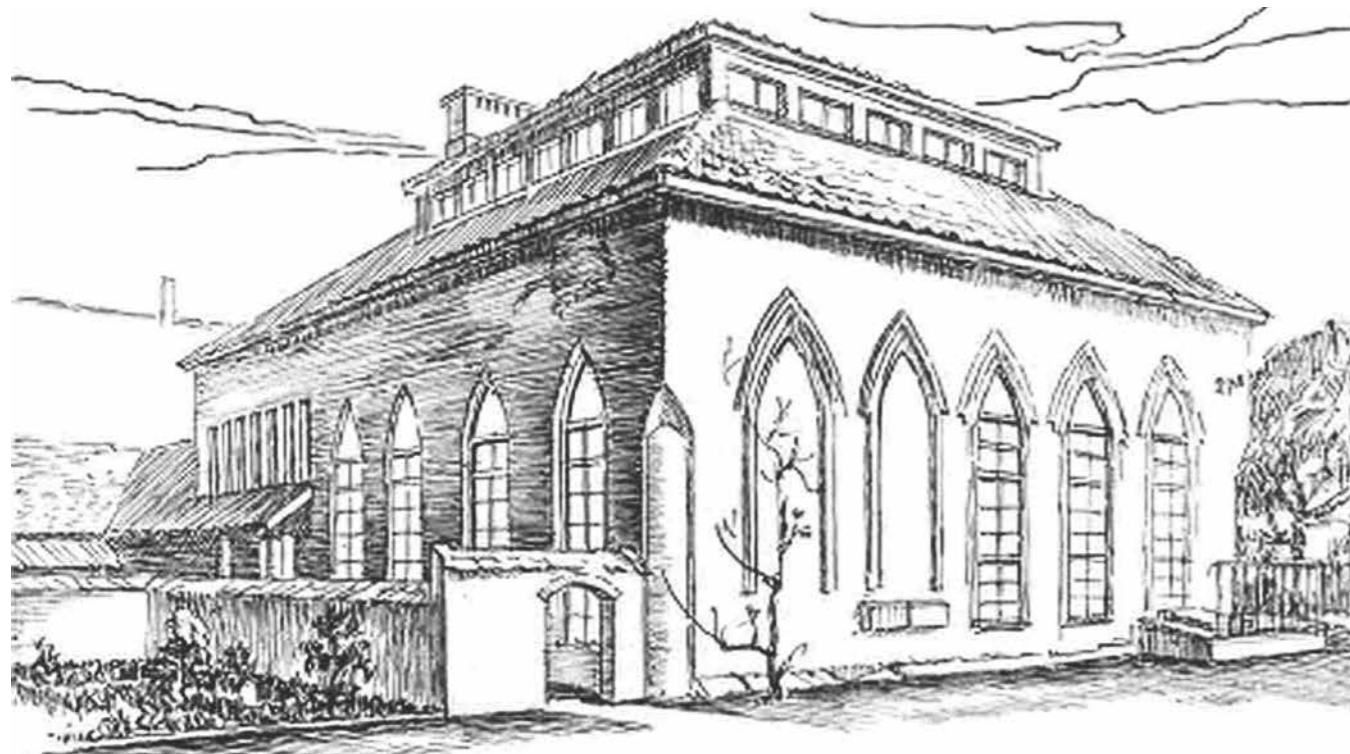
shacharit (from Hebrew, for “morning”): the morning prayer.



Talmud (Hebrew for “learning”): the authoritative body of rabbinical literature, the book of Jewish law, and written rabbinical commentary on Jewish laws, ethics, history, and traditions.



Torah (Hebrew for “teaching”): the most important text in Judaism, consisting of the five books of the Bible dictated to Moses by God. The Torah encompasses 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) establishing man’s relationship with God and the meaning and essence of all existence. Only Torah scrolls handwritten in Hebrew are used in synagogues.



The Butcher's Synagogue (once located at present day No. 6 V. Sladkevičiaus Street, Kaunas). Jonas Lukšė, 2013

Baal-Makhshoves²⁰ THE BUTCHERS' SYNAGOGUE

If all the buildings now being renovated were able to speak, it would be impossible to bear.

Every little ruin currently being fitted out with a new set of roof-tiles or a couple of new windows would bombard us with all manner of stories... tales dating back to the time Jews first began to spread out from the fish market as far as Poyarkov's wall – stories of transgressed boundaries, stories of narrow windows peeking over into Reb Itsak Velvi's property; stories of a dozen heirs who could not agree on how to divvy things up, quarrels passed down from parent to child, dozens more heirs joining the fray with each new generation; stories of the expulsion from Kaunas, when the houses became

dark grass-widows; stories of the Germans who commandeered houses and melted down every last doorknob to make bullets; stories of one regime after another turning a blind eye to fine Kaunas furniture, tearing out the floorboards one by one; stories from the fires, when a Jewish woman ran through the streets, clutching a quilt to her bosom, searching for her sick mother who had not managed to save herself, reduced to a pile of bones, and so on and so on.

But these refurbished edifices are naturally silent, and even if you hammer a seven-inch nail into them, they remain as mute as a fish.

There are some ruins, however, that do occasionally find their voices, recounting wondrous tales in a manner only women and the elderly are sometimes prone to. These voices usually belong to those buildings equipped not with a sink, but with a ritual washstand for ablutions; buildings which, in place of beds, have only

²⁰ Baal-Makhshoves ("Master of Thoughts") was the pseudonym of the famous literary critic and writer Isidor Israel Elyashev (1873–1924). For more, see pages 66, 113, 122

a narrow board on which a recluse has sat for twenty years of his young life; instead of mirrors there is a pulpit, where the readings are sometimes interrupted by the arrival at the door of a worried, disconsolate mother, where sometimes a young man lets his mind wander when he should be grasping the roots of the Torah.

Ruins like these do not stop speaking even when cats and dogs roam through their old crumbling furnaces, when rubbish from the neighboring Jewish houses accumulates in mounds in these once sacred places. If you happen to stroll past the hollowed-out skeletons of such buildings in the evening hours you may hear voices, speaking and reminiscing, often with insistence.

Now there are honourable people walking around Kaunas, with the faces of synagogue gabbais, with wide spade-shaped beards shot through with grey, with sober gaits and movements, with pre-occupied faces – seeking out former owners, the children of those who once had a connection to these holy places of yore. They rattle their collection boxes, saving up to rebuild, brick by brick, a synagogue, a Butchers' prayer house. They visit me too. Me, who has not set foot in a prayer house in many years, whose only memories of a place of worship go all the way back to childhood.

All of a sudden, the Butchers' Synagogue begins to tell me story after story. And just like that I pictured Leybe Pak who used to help poor women recite the prayer before dying as they drew their last breath, and I could suddenly hear the old mournful, stubborn voice of Avrom Kez who, every Friday evening of his life, would run around warning the shopkeepers to close up shop before the benediction of the candles. I caught a shining glimpse of the coppery-red beard of tall, broad Yerukhem the knife grinder who used to set down his whetstone and wheel by the synagogue, sit down and fervently leaf through the Zohar, the poor man struggling his whole life to grasp the barest meaning of the words. The twisted Jew from Vandžiogala – a figure right out of a Marc Chagall painting, who dealt in Leipzig lottery tickets, and had a year-round subscription to good old Kaunas mud – suddenly entered my thoughts. Also, Reb Sholem the Recluse, that cheerful Hasidic scholar, who would dance magnificently during the few happy Jewish days, and who would implore old Dr. Faynberg to repent if he wanted to enjoy the Next Life as much as he had this one – he too came to mind when I was visited by the gabbais of the Butchers' Synagogue. I suddenly saw the two rich men at the Eastern Wall, one calm and taciturn, the other a talkative man, full of spirit, a people-person – and I remembered the kind of politics that went on in the synagogue when Reb Yitskhok Elkhonen, the pride of Kaunas, deigned to visit

once a year to consecrate the building by praying in the Butchers' Synagogue. At that moment the highly fraught question was posed as to which side of the Holy Ark dividing the Eastern Wall would sit the great rabbinical authority, the pride of Lithuania: next to the taciturn dignitary, or next to the talkative one?

And among all these figures two faces stand out: jolly, chubby Shaye the Magid, and Yekusial the head Shammass, who was tall and lanky and had a pitch-black beard like something out of a story book. Shaye spent every day on Butchers' Street where the Butchers' Synagogue stood. Even on Simchat Torah, when he would dance with a broom in his hand, he never left the boundaries of that street. The street marked the limit of Jewishness. Beyond there were already church shops and a policeman patrolling the pavement.

All of the aforementioned figures arose in my memory when the gabbais from my father's old synagogue paid me a visit. Seeing those already distant figures I thought: You can look at Jewish prayer houses from whichever perspective you wish but one thing is undeniable – they have always been safe havens for all kinds of wonderful characters, for men of duty, frightfully original, genuinely striking folksy characters. To this day our entire political and societal life has not created a fishpond to match these places, capable of nurturing such strong down-to-earth personalities. There was once the Cities of Refuge, for those who had unwittingly transgressed – in our epoch the prayer house is the modern City of Refuge for these wonderful specimens who emerge from the life of the genuine Jewish people. There you will find the archetype of the Jewish labourer more clearly articulated even than in those circles where people debate Marx without a Holy Ark or a pulpit – that is to say: without the wonderful thousand-year culture of a highly spiritual and downtrodden people.

That is why the ruins of the Butchers' Synagogue speak so loudly to poets and the elderly alike.

Translated from Yiddish by Daniel Kennedy

gabbai: a synagogue administrator or treasurer.

Simchat Torah: a Jewish autumn holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of Torah readings and the beginning of a new cycle.



THE SABBATH

On Friday afternoon, the shopkeepers already began to lock their shops. One did not wait until the sun commanded the shopkeepers to close their shops. The street people with their little carriages, the tradesmen, the water carriers, the businessmen of the marketplace, and the regular Jews all went home to get dressed, wash up, and prepare to greet the Sabbath. On Friday night, it was as if the Divine Presence enveloped Kovno. Jews with combed beards filled the Beis Midrashes with prayer and melodies as if from heavenly angels coming before the Throne of Honor. It seemed that the Jews here had everything good and did not know of any concerns about livelihood.

A mysterious calm came along with the Sabbath Day. Few Jews were seen outside during the day. Even a gentile did not go through the streets of Kovno on the Sabbath. The shops were locked and the houses were closed. Cheder [a religious elementary school – Ed.] children who played with buttons in the synagogue yard all week comport themselves on the Sabbath in a quiet, stately manner out of awe. They did not raise their voices, as that would have disturbed the calm of their parents on the holy Sabbath.

On the Sabbath between mincha and maariv, Jews would go for a stroll along the Slobodker or Aleksoter bridges. It was a stroll with holy steps on the Aleksoter Bridge when Rabbi Yitzchak Elkhanan would walk with two rabbinical judges on both sides and respond, “Good Sabbath, Good Year!” to the Jews who were passing by.

Those walks bring to mind a memory. My father and I would go for a stroll on the same bridge as did the Kovno Rabbi. When I would see Rabbi Yitzchak Elkhanan, I would let go of Father’s hand, run to the rabbi, and wish him “Good Sabbath, Rabbi!” with great enthusiasm. Rabbi Yitzchak Elkhanan would respond to me “Good Sabbath! Good Year! You should be a pious Jew!”

My father derived a great deal of pleasure from this. Was it a small thing to receive such a blessing from the Kovno Rabbi?! Of course, his son would grow up to be a pious Jew. A blessing from such a Tzadik [a righteous man – Ed.] must be fulfilled.

Frank Epstein²¹

²¹ Frank Epstein. *Reminiscences of Kaunas*. Lite (Lithuania), 1195.

kiddush (from Hebrew, meaning “sanctification”): God’s blessing recited during the Sabbath and Jewish holidays over a cup filled with kosher wine. The wine should be poured until it overflows the cup, symbolizing an abundance of blessings.

sabbath, shabbat (from Hebrew, meaning “rest” or “cessation”, *shabes* in Yiddish): a weekly holy day that begins on Friday evening and lasts until sunset the following Saturday. Sabbath is devoted to rest and praising Yahweh. The Sabbath is also a time for renewing family ties and spending time with friends and loved ones.

No work may be done during the Sabbath and nothing new may be created (thus, reading is allowed, but not writing). It is also forbidden to engage in commerce or business, discuss politics, make plans for the coming day, prepare for travel, etc. Exceptions to these restrictions are allowed in the event of threats to life or health.

Upon returning from the synagogue, a husband blesses his children and honors his wife during dinner by reciting the hymn *Eshet Hayil* (Woman of Valor) from a prayer book. A table is set with the best dishware and food, Sabbath hymns are sung, and the Talmud is studied.

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

In the early 19th century, Lithuania’s Jewish community was closed and fairly conservative and less influenced by innovations than in other regions, where Hasidic Jews (from the Hebrew word *hasid*, meaning “piety”) were more influential. The Hasidic movement that emerged in Eastern Europe in the 18th century advocated a religiosity steeped in prayer, emotions, and religious enthusiasm, and deemphasized traditional Talmudic learning.²²

But this Jewish religious movement did not generate much of a response in Kaunas, where Hasidic Jews comprised only a small part of the overall community. The great majority of Jews were influenced by rabbinical teachings calling for a consistent adherence to the teachings of the Torah, adapting them to new circumstances. As a result, a unique and modern community of Jews, known as Litvaks, emerged in Lithuania and in Kaunas, a group distinguished by Talmudic learning.²³

At the same time, Kaunas saw the arrival of the Haskalah (from the Hebrew word for “reason” or “intellect”) – also called the Jewish Enlightenment, a movement seeking to reform the closed Jewish community so that it might become part of the modernizing Western world.

Mid-19th century was heavily influenced by German culture and there was still no established center there of rabbinical intellectualism. Kaunas thus became “one of the strongest Haskalah strongholds in Lithuania.”²⁴

Kovno was a pretty, provincial town when we settled there [in 1859 – Ed.]. Near the Prussian border, it was natural that a German style of life influenced the whole town. Though the Jewish tradition remained intact in the small Lithuanian towns, in Kovno the enlightenment was in full swing. In progressive Jewish homes, mostly among wealthy families whose fathers and sons were engaged in commerce with Germany and who frequently travelled across the border, the deviation from Jewish tradition was great. About the only thing that remained unchanged was the kosher kitchen.

Pauline Wengeroff²⁵

Beginning in the 1850s, Kaunas became an enduring center of the moral and ethical Mussar movement, arising from the necessity to respond to new cultural challenges and adapt to new economic and social changes. The Mussar movement was joined not only by some independently-minded intellectuals, but also by some of Kaunas’ wealthier Jews.

²² Aušrelė Kristina Pažėraitė. Išsaugoti savastį ar supanašėti? Žydų mokyklų reformos Lietuvoje Nikolajaus I laikais. *Darbai ir dienos*, nr. 34, Kaunas, 2003, 235.

²³ Žydų gyvenimas Lietuvoje: parodos katalogas. Ed. Rūta Puišytė, Darius Staliūnas, Vilnius, 2002, 75.

²⁴ Aušra Pažėraitė. Žydų kultūrinių ir politinių orientyrų pokyčiai Aleksandro II laikais. „Žydų klausimas“ Lietuvoje XIX a. viduryje. Ed. Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, Vilnius, 2004, 81.

²⁵ Pauline Wengeroff. *Memoirs of a Grandmother*, 164.

ZIONISM

At the age of ten, like many students from my class, I joined the General Zionist youth movement. Many of our activities were similar to those of the Boy Scouts – for example, camping in tents in the forest. Among ourselves we spoke Hebrew and sang Hebrew songs. We often discussed the possibility of a trip to Palestine: the preparations required for such a trip, the best time to go, and what we would do there. We sometimes attended lectures at school that were given by people who had just been to Palestine and who spoke about their experiences. . . .

The various [Zionist] groups all agreed, however, that the important things to maintain were our Zionist conviction and Jewish identity, which wasn't easy in those times. Therefore, we held regular study sessions, designed to bring youngsters closer to Zionist ideas. This "Zionist basic education" often took place in the form of a camp with tents and was very popular among Jewish youngsters.

Zev Birger²⁶

Everyone knows that Jewish communists consider Zionism to be their greatest enemy, like 'an ally of English imperialism', and that hundreds of Zionists in Russia are tormented for years in prison and in exile. Only the ignorant or those with ill will can confuse Zionism – or any Zionist party – with communism.

*Dos Vort Responds to Lietuvos Aidas. Apžvalga, 1937*²⁷

Zionism became established in Lithuania in the final decades of the 19th century, spreading widely in smaller towns in particular. Lithuanian Zionists took part in the first Zionist Congress and were members of the World Zionist Organization. By the late 19th century, there were thirteen Zionist organizations in the Kaunas Governorate.²⁸

In the early 20th century, the Zionist movement in Lithuania was considerably fractured, with competing secular and religious organizations and opposing proponents of Hebrew and Yiddish culture. A 1918 conference in Vilnius united all the Zionist organizations

into one Lithuanian Zionist Union.²⁹ Perceiving their activities as a long-term endeavor, the Zionists of an independent Lithuania became active in the country's political, social, and cultural life. The greatest influence on Lithuanian Jewish community life was exerted by two different Zionist groups: the General Zionists and the Zionist Socialists. The former considered themselves to be a moderate liberal party and included the great majority of intellectuals and prominent public figures. Some of these individuals were later appointed to independent Lithuania's first cabinet: Yakov Vygodsky served as a minister without portfolio for Jewish affairs, Simon Rosenbaum was Foreign Minister, and Nachman Rachmilevich was the Deputy Minister of Commerce and Industry.³⁰

The Kaunas Zionist Society (Kauno sionistų draugija) was officially registered on May 14, 1919 and was affiliated with the World Zionist Organization. One year later, it renamed itself the Lithuanian Zionist Society. In 1928, the society was again reorganized as the Lithuanian Zionist Organization. Its principal goals included the development of Jewish national awareness, the promotion of the Hebrew language and culture, and the preparation of Jews for life and work in Palestine. The organization also established the Tarbut (Hebrew for "culture") School and Educational Department.³¹

In 1923, the Zionist Socialist Organization in Lithuania split into two parties. One of them, the Zionist Socialists, was a left-wing political organization and represented workers and tradesmen. The other, established in Kaunas in March, 1923 was the Tseirei-Tsiyon Hitahdut (Youth of Zion-Unity) Lithuanian Zionist Socialist Party, and sought to represent office workers and civil servants and adopted right-wing policies.³² The party was disbanded in July, 1935.

An organization called HeChalutz (Pioneer) was founded in Kaunas in the autumn of 1926. The movement sought to help Lithuania's Jews find productive employment in agriculture and industry and also trained individuals intending to emigrate to Palestine as skilled workers.³³

²⁹ Eglė Bendikaitė. Sionistinio judėjimo tendencijos Lietuvos Respublikoje (1918–1940 m.). *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas*, t. 8, nr. 3–4. Klaipėda, 2001, 70.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pažyma apie Lietuvos sioninkų organizacijos fondą nr. 588. LCVA.

³² Pažyma apie sionistų organizacijų fondą nr. 1140. LCVA; Sionistai socialistai. <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/sionistai-socialistai-86717>.

³³ Pažyma apie hecholucų organizacijų fondą nr. 591. LCVA.

²⁶ Zev Birger. *No Time for Patience*, 27.

²⁷ "Dos Vort" atsako "L. Aidui". *Apžvalga*, 1937 m. liepos 11 d., 5.

²⁸ Henrika Ilgevič. Lietuvos žydų (litvakų) politinės ir kultūrinės veiklos aktyvėjimas XIX a. pabaigoje – XX a. pradžioje. *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*. Ed. Antanas Andrijauskas, Vilnius, 2013, 203.



Young Zionist Socialists joined an organization called HeChalutz Hatzair (Young Pioneer), which sought to educate Jewish youth, develop their national awareness, and prepare them for work in Palestine.³⁴ The Gordonia Zionist youth association was established in Kaunas in 1928 to foster national and social awareness among young Jews, promote Jewish physical labor and the Hebrew language, and support academic and cultural activities by Jewish youth.³⁵

The Revisionist Zionist movement emerged in Paris in 1925, led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. The movement's principal goal was to transform Palestine into a Jewish state. Associations and societies supporting the movement also soon began to appear in Kaunas. The Lithuanian Jewish Scouting Association Berit Yosef Trumpeldor, named after Yosef Trumpeldor, was established in

1929, the Vladimir Jabotinsky Independent Zionist Revisionists' Union was founded in 1933, and in 1935 – the Betar Jewish National Union. Secondary school students were also very active, establishing the Arnonija Student's Union, while university students founded the El Al Jewish fraternity in 1933.³⁶

Zionist Socialists were staunch defenders of the idea of Jewish national autonomy within Lithuania. A book on this subject, *Jewish National Autonomy in Lithuania*, was published in 1938, written by Lev Garfunkel, the long-serving leader of the Hitahdut organization, member of the Lithuanian parliament, secretary-general and vice president of the Jewish national council, president of the council of Jewish people's banks in Lithuania, and member of the Kaunas City Council.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Pažyma apie sionistų organizacijų fondą nr. 1140. LCVA.

³⁶ Pažyma apie sionistinių revizionistinių organizacijų fondą nr. 589. LCVA.

³⁷ Eglė Bendikaitė. Dvi ideologijos – vienas judėjimas. *Darbai ir dienos*, nr. 34, Kaunas, 2003, 260.

Gemara (from the Aramaic for “completion”, “tradition”) – the part of the Talmud that contains rabbinical commentaries and analysis of the Mishnah. The Mishnah and the Gemara are the two components of the Talmud. Because the Gemara is not printed separately, the term is used as a synonym for the Talmud.

halachà (from the Hebrew *halakh* – “to go”, “the way to walk”) – the collective body of Jewish religious laws.

yeshiva (Hebrew for “assembly” or “sitting”) – a school for the religious education of children and adults.

Mishnah (Hebrew for “[teaching by] repetition”) – the first major written collection of the halacha code (dated to the year 220), a compendium of legal decrees promulgated by rabbinic sages; the foundation of the Talmud.

mussar (from the Hebrew for “moral conduct” or “ethics”) – an ethical, educational, and cultural movement founded in the mid-19th century by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter to promote human spiritual growth. A unique form of Lithuanian Jewish religiosity emerged from the Mussar movement, with its own literature, meditation practice, and approach to study. Salanter sought to emphasize the moral principles within Judaism. Lithuania had several yeshivas that embraced the Mussar system of study.

shtiebel (Yiddish for “little house” or “little room”) – a small, informal house of prayer.



Star of David (from the Hebrew *Magen David*, meaning “the shield of David”): an ancient symbol in the form of a six-pointed star that in the modern era came to symbolize Zionism and the State of Israel.

In medieval Jewish manuscripts, the Star of David symbolized the shield of David, King of Israel and Judea, on which were etched all the names of God. After Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV of the Luxembourg dynasty allowed the Prague Jewish community to have its own flag in 1354, the Star of David became a universal Jewish symbol, subsequently spreading throughout the Jewish community of Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime forced persecuted Jews to wear a distinctive sign, a yellow Star of David, which soon came to symbolize their suffering. Since 1948, the Star of David has been displayed on the Israeli national flag.³⁸

Zion: a hill in Israel on which the Temple of Jerusalem was built. The name of the hill became a symbol of Jerusalem and the entire land of Israel.

Zionism: an ideology based on the desire to restore a national Jewish state within its historical homeland; a political movement based on this ideology that trained pioneering colonists and promoted the Hebrew language and culture. Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) is considered the founder of Zionism and organized the first world Zionist congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, which established the World Zionist Organization. Zionism fractured into several competing movements – political, practical, and religious – but all of them embraced one goal: the resolution of the “Jewish question”.

After its emergence in the late 19th century, the term Zionism took on a political meaning and began to refer to an ideological social movement seeking to establish a political home for the Jewish people on its historical lands, i.e., to recreate a Jewish state in Palestine.

³⁸ Dovydo žvaigždė. Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija. <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/Dovydo-zvaigzde-50197>



BUNDISTS

Kovno took a front place among the Socialist struggling cities in the Jewish arena. A large number of Jewish youth, who were occupied with Torah and were pious and religious until the rise of the Bundist movement in Kovno, ended up joining the Bund. We have already mentioned the tradesmen such as tailors, shoemakers, hat makers, tinsmiths, bakers, clerks, sack makers, and cigarette makers; but there were also male and female gymnasium students and Jews of the general intelligentsia who decided to join the ranks of the Bund. Among them were educated doctors, lawyers, bookkeepers, and other professionals.

Frank Epstein³⁹

The second Bundist conference was held in Kaunas in October 1898, followed by the third in December 1899. The latter convention raised the issue of the Jewish national question for the first time, debating a report prepared by John Mill, the founder of the Bund’s foreign affairs committee, but after discussion the eventual resolution was limited to a demand for civil rights. The resolution proclaimed:

Each city must have the right to decide how to celebrate May Day. The Central Committee shall publish May Day proclamations on behalf of the Union. These must include the following demands: an eight-hour workday, political freedom, and Jewish civil equality.⁴⁰

³⁹ Frank Epstein. *Reminiscences of Kaunas. Lite (Lithuania)*, 1201.

⁴⁰ Бунд. Документы и материалы. 1894–1921 гг. Москва, 2010, с. 75–77.

Seventeen individuals were detained during the May Day demonstration on Nikolai Prospekt in 1902. The official charges emphasized that:

The demonstration was organized by poor Jews and illegal book reading clubs, whose members had been charged in 1902 with participating in the April 15 demonstrations in Kaunas. . . . The demonstration followed a coordinated plan. Participants assembled without drawing much attention to themselves, gathering in discrete groups of five workers, so that approximately at 9:00 pm some 70–100 people had assembled in this manner. As they made their way toward the Military Prison, they began to shout various slogans: “Down with the police!”, “Down with the government!”, “Down with the Tsar!”, “Hurrah!”, “Republic!”, “Long live the Russian Revolution!”, “Freedom!”, and “Long live the people’s majority!”⁴¹

In 1903, I was arrested in a demonstration at the Kovno City Theater (Gorodeskai). It was a protest demonstration against the pogroms and persecution of the Jews in Russia. Naturally, we spoke out against the Czarist regime and demanded political freedom, a shorter work week for the workers, and national rights for the people of Russia.

At every demonstration, more than 100 demonstrators were arrested and brought to the Kovno Yellow Prison. It is remarkable that many youths with whom I had studied in cheder, including some members of the Psalms Society, were among those arrested. Neither I nor the others realized that we would be joining the Bundist Organization, and that we would belong to the Socialist Movement. I was very surprised when I found youths from wealthy homes, students of the Slobodka Yeshiva and even from the Mussar Shtibels among those arrested.

There were also married men and women among those arrested, as well as members of the intelligentsia and students of the gymnasiums. However, the largest group were workers of various trades.

Frank Epstein⁴²

During the commemoration of May Day in 1905 in Kaunas:

Around fifty people gathered on Nikolai Prospekt and hoisted a red flag, shouting various socialist slogans and shooting pistols into the

air some 20–30 times. The participants dispersed once the police arrived, leaving behind Bund Kaunas chapter leaflets with declarations that Jewish workers of Kaunas were celebrating May Day with the proletariat around the world, and with such slogans as: “End the war!”, “Long live the democratic republic!”, “Long live the 8-hour workday!”, and “Long live socialism!”⁴³

Between 1918 and 1920, many Bund members joined the Communist Party, and remaining members pursued other means of legal activity. In 1918, the Jewish Bund Social Democratic Workers’ Party participated in elections to the Kaunas City Council, winning six seats. At the ceremonial first meeting of the council, a Bundist representative declared that “our party does not recognize this city council. The only government is the workers’ (socialists’) council, which must establish a dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁴⁴

Bund (Yiddish for “union”) – The General Jewish Labour Bund in Russia and Poland, later the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln, un Rusland) was founded in Vilnius in October 1897 (according to the new calendar – Ed.) by a conference of Jewish Social Democratic group representatives. The Bund sought to reform the Russian Empire along federalist principles and end the discrimination of Jews. It supported demands for Jewish ethnic autonomy and the use of Yiddish as the Jewish national language. The Bund in Lithuania was dissolved in April 1921.⁴⁵

41 Juozapas Paškauskas. *Laisvalaikio kultūra didžiuosiuose Lietuvos miestuose ir provincijoje XIX a. pabaigoje – XX a. pradžioje*. Vilnius, 2017, 213.

42 Frank Epstein. *Reminiscences of Kaunas. Lite (Lithuania)*, 1202.

43 Juozapas Paškauskas. *Laisvalaikio kultūra*, 217.

44 Kauno žinios. *Vienybė*, 1918, nr. 50, 781.

45 Šarūnas Liekis. *Bundas*. <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/Bundas-58599>.



Vilniaus Street, Kaunas. c. 1915. Private collection

EXPULSION IN 1915

By an order of the Tsarist government issued on May 5, 1915, the Jews of Kaunas were required to abandon the city within 24 hours.

From this edict of expulsion not one Jew was spared. It included infants, women in childbirth, the sick, the lame, the poor, the wealthy merchant, the artisan, the lawyer, and the physician. All fled eastward, because to the West was the German battle front. Passenger trains carried many away. Cattle cars, which I have seen labelled “24 persons or 6 horses” carried a larger number. Freight cars carried more. But probably half of these 190,000 wandered away on foot. Most of these are practically lost in what is now still Russian territory. Those who fled to Vilna and to other places which have since been

occupied by German forces were later permitted to return. The city of Kovno today, however, instead of its normal population of 45,000 Jews, has only about 4,200 Jewish souls. Its business thoroughfares have the silence of a graveyard or a deserted city. Most of the stores are closed and boarded up; the Jewish storekeepers have gone and never returned. I attended Sabbath services in the large Synagogue in Kaunas, and I found a congregation of perhaps forty, where ordinarily a thousand worshipped.

Hershfield Journey and Report, 1916⁴⁶

46 Hershfield journey and report. *HIAS monthly report*, June–July 1916, 6–7.

In August, 1915, after eleven days of fighting, Kaunas was occupied by the German army. The Kaunas fortress complex lost its military significance and decrees issued by the Tsarist government became invalid. For a brief time, the German-occupied city descended into anarchy and turmoil. After the front stabilized, Jews began to gradually return to Kaunas. Tadas Daugirdas, an archeologist and then director of the Kaunas City Museum, described the events in Kaunas in his journal in great detail:

[September 18, 1915] Many shops were plundered that day. The mob was looting together with German soldiers. . . . Before that, Russian soldiers had done the looting. The first things they plundered were the wine cellars, then the goldsmith shops, and then the food factories and haberdasheries.⁴⁷

[September 26, 1915] The military presence in the city is much smaller, but there are many returning Jews, Kaunas residents coming back from Vilnius, and those coming from surrounding towns from which they had not been expelled. The Jews quickly resumed commerce: arriving only today, by the day after tomorrow they had already opened their shops. Today, I noticed tens of newly opened Jewish stores. They're mostly selling cigars, German cigarettes, various preserved foods, and some are selling tea, biscuits, cakes, and bread.⁴⁸

[September 29, 1915] I went to Perkauskas' for coffee, where I met Kahan, a Kaunas merchant who had been in Vilnius. . . . He was so happy to see me that not only didn't he let me pay for my coffee, he paid out 40 pfennigs, since we both also had a biscuit. I had barely parted ways with him when I met Shuwal, the owner of the Minerva iron factory. Once again there was great joy and heartfelt greetings. Driving from City Hall to the depot I noticed many old acquaintances: Old Town merchants and the young Abba Birman, who, upon seeing me waved his handkerchief at me in such an ostentatious way that Dr. Pusch asked me if they were good friends of mine and if I'd like to stop and say hello. I told him they were Old Town merchants and old acquaintances, and that they greeted so warmly because they were overjoyed to return to their old domain.⁴⁹

[October 12, 1915] I took the tram to the confectionary on the corner of Mickevičiaus Street, which a Jewish merchant from Raseiniai had

rented from Mr. Bieleckis. . . . After finishing my coffee, which was better than at Petrauskas' place, and asking for 50 cigars, I paid in cash and went home.⁵⁰

Jews did not have it easy after returning to Kaunas.

There were many signs with the words "Bier Stube" – miserable holes in the wall where they offered beer and... well, girls. Those joints were run by Jews and frequented almost entirely by soldiers. This was almost the only way for Jews to make a living. The girls at those bars were also Jewish. There was no money to be earned in the city and the poor people suffered greatly.

Julius Bielskis. *The Delegates' Trip to Lithuania, 1916*⁵¹

47 Tadas Daugirdas. *Kaunas vokiečių okupacijoje. Karo archyvas*, t. 9, 1938, 141.

48 Ibid., 168.

49 Ibid., 170.

50 Ibid., 175.

51 J.J. Bielskis. *Delegatų kelionė Lietuvon 1916 m.*, Boston, MA, 1916, 32.

JEWIS IN THE KAUNAS CITY GOVERNMENT

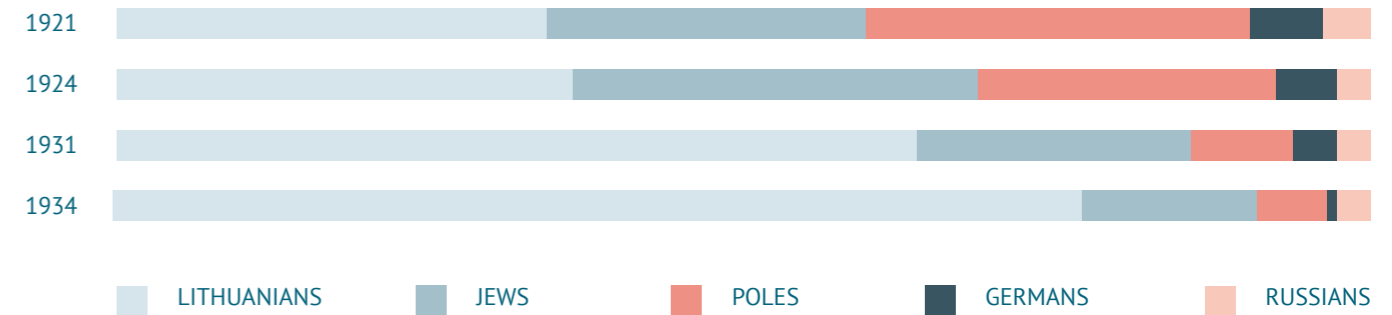
Kaunas Jews actively joined in the building of a young, new Lithuanian state. They participated in all aspects of life in the new country, including in the creation and functioning of the Kaunas municipal government. In October 1918, a committee of representatives from various political parties and social organizations in Kaunas, the precursor to the formal municipal government, included twenty Jews among its seventy members. During elections held to the first City Council on December 18–19, 1918, Jews presented as many as seven political party candidate lists and succeeded in winning 22 council seats (with Lithuanians winning 12). Jews not only participated in the elections, they also helped organize them: M. Soloveichik and E. Rabinovich served on the election organizing committee. One of the drafters of the democratic election rules was L. Garfunkel, a lawyer and Zionist Socialist.⁵²

Jews were also active in subsequent elections, particularly in 1924, where they received 10,000 votes, or 30% of the total. Lithuanians only succeeded in securing majorities in the Kaunas government in 1931 and 1934, largely due to changes in the law on municipal government ushered in by the Tautininkai – the Lithuanian Nationalist Party.⁵³



Stamp of the Organizing Committee for Elections to the Kaunas City Council. December, 1918. KRVA

KAUNAS CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS ACCORDING TO ETHNICITY. 1921–1934



Kaunas City Municipality Statistics Office data, KRVA

52 Kauno žydų bendruomenė. Virtuali paroda. https://www.archyvai.lt/kaa_virtualios-parodos/kauno-zydu-bendruomene-29n1.html

53 Ibid.

THE FIRST LITHUANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY CONFERENCE IN KAUNAS

Jewish communities began to establish themselves officially in 1919. In early 1920, the Ministry of Jewish Affairs declared that “in the past five months, all of unoccupied Lithuania has been blanketed by a dense network of Jewish communities, attracting all vibrant and active members for the general welfare of Jewish residents.”⁵⁴

The first conference of the Lithuanian Jewish communities was held in Kaunas on January 5–11, 1920, organized to “lay a foundation for a new Jewish life” and “discuss all pertinent questions of Jewish life, develop a common program for the work ahead, and unite Lithuania’s Jewish inhabitants.”⁵⁵

The conference was convened by Minister of Jewish Affairs Max Soloveichik and had 135 representatives from 80 communities. In his opening remarks, Soloveichik took note of:

*“... the great significance of this conference, convened to lay the foundations for Jewish national autonomy in Lithuania, and regretted that Jews suffering under Polish occupation are not able to participate in this conference, but that he firmly believed that a future Lithuanian Jewish Conference would take place in Vilnius, Lithuania’s capital and the center of Jewish spiritual cultural and social life.”*⁵⁶

The conference was also addressed by Lithuanian Foreign Minister Augustinas Voldemaras:

*“I come not only as a representative of the Government, but also as your friend, one who has learned a great deal from you. . . . We view national minorities as equal members of the Lithuanian State. We understand the necessity of Jewish national autonomy and we will seek to ensure that all nations in Lithuania can live a free and happy life.”*⁵⁷

The conference adopted a resolution calling for the building of relations between Lithuanians and Jews in an independent Lithuania based on equality and mutual trust.

*Convening in the Provisional Capital of the State of Lithuania, the First Conference of Lithuanian Jewish Communities, on behalf of the Jewish nation which it represents and whose aspirations for a free life have survived both the oppression of the Tsarist years and the horrors of occupation, sends its warmest greetings to a reborn independent Lithuania, in whose rebirth it sees the victory of those great principles to which the Jewish nation also binds its own national aspirations. Fully aware of the great challenges facing a new Lithuania, the Conference believes that its unilateral development and blossoming can only be possible with the full democratization of its political order and the full equality of national rights of peoples residing within it. Only through the creation of a common new State can we develop shared national aspirations based on mutual trust and a peaceful, free coexistence. Therein this Conference sees the promise of Lithuania’s prosperity, celebrating the good fortune of all its sons.*⁵⁸

JEWIS IN THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

On December 11, 1918, Yakov Vygodsky, elected to the State Council of Lithuania, greeted the Lithuanian people, observing that “we live in one territory and have lived better than in neighboring countries.”⁵⁹ It is not surprising, then, that Jews actively joined in Lithuania’s defense when its statehood was endangered. Three thousand Jews served in the Lithuanian armed forces and took part in various battles between 1919 and 1923.⁶⁰ The names of Jewish volunteers were later etched into a commemorative plaque hung in the Choral Synagogue in Kaunas.

Lithuania’s Jews contributed greatly to the revival and establishment of an independent Lithuania, particularly in the economic and political fields: They successfully fostered goodwill for Lithuania throughout the world, and you, the volunteer servicemen and soldiers on the front lines, put your most precious possession – your own lives – at risk when your homeland was in danger. Your union embodies your noble work and sacrifices, which no one will ever forget and which everyone must honor and cherish. I am convinced that this spirit lives on and will always thrive among you. May you be blessed, and

*may you work for your Homeland and Nation, and may happiness follow your every step.*⁶¹

Speech by Abraham Duber Kohan Shapiro,
Chief Rabbi of Kaunas, 1934⁶²

At the Choral Synagogue in Kaunas. All of the walls are bare, with no images, inscriptions, or other such things. Only on one wall there hangs a large, black panel, almost as tall as the wall itself, upon which are inscribed in gold lettering the names of Jewish soldiers who laid down their young lives upon the altar of Lithuania. It is a fairly long list of young Jewish men who fought on the battlefield for Lithuania’s independence between 1918 and 1922. . . . The story of these first years of the dawn of Lithuania’s independence is exceptionally honorable for Lithuania’s Jews as well, who in those difficult years shared with the Lithuanians a desire to liberate themselves from the horrible yoke of their enemies. The best tribute is this black commemorative plaque, hanging in the Kaunas Choral Synagogue.

M. Evenstein. “They Died!”, *Skydas*, 1934⁶³

In 1927, a gathering of former Jewish soldiers decided to establish a single association for veterans. On February 16, 1928, the Jewish veterans commemorated the tenth anniversary of Lithuania’s independence in a solemn ceremony at Kaunas City Hall. The need for such an association became evident at the ceremony. Eventually, on June 24, 1933, the charter for the union of Jewish veterans of the Lithuanian Wars of Independence was officially adopted. The association opened an office in Kaunas at No. 10 A. Mapu Street in 1934.

The association’s Kaunas chapter had 542 members, of which 42 were former volunteers (*savanoriai*), 25 were so-called founding volunteers (*savanoriai kūrėjai*), and two had participated in the Klaipėda uprising that led to the Baltic port city’s transfer to Lithuanian control. 182 association members had seen combat on the battlefield.⁶⁴

61 1934 m. Kauno Vyriausiojo Rabino Abraomo Duberio Kohano Šapiro kalba. *Skydas*. Kaunas, 1934, 4.

62 Ibid.

63 M. Evenšteinas. Jie žuvo!... (Mintys ties paminkline lenta Kauno choralinėj sinagogoj). *Skydas*. Kaunas, 1934, 6.

64 Algirdas Jakubčionis. Lietuvos žydai nepriklausomybės karuose. *Žydu kultūros paveldas Lietuvoje*. Ed. Alfredas Jomantas, Vilnius, 2005, 173.

54 LCVA, f. 383, ap. 8, b. 817.

55 Žydu bendruomenių suvažiavimas. *Lietuva*, 1920 m. sausio 3 d, 1–2.

56 LCVA, f. 383, ap. 8, b. 817.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

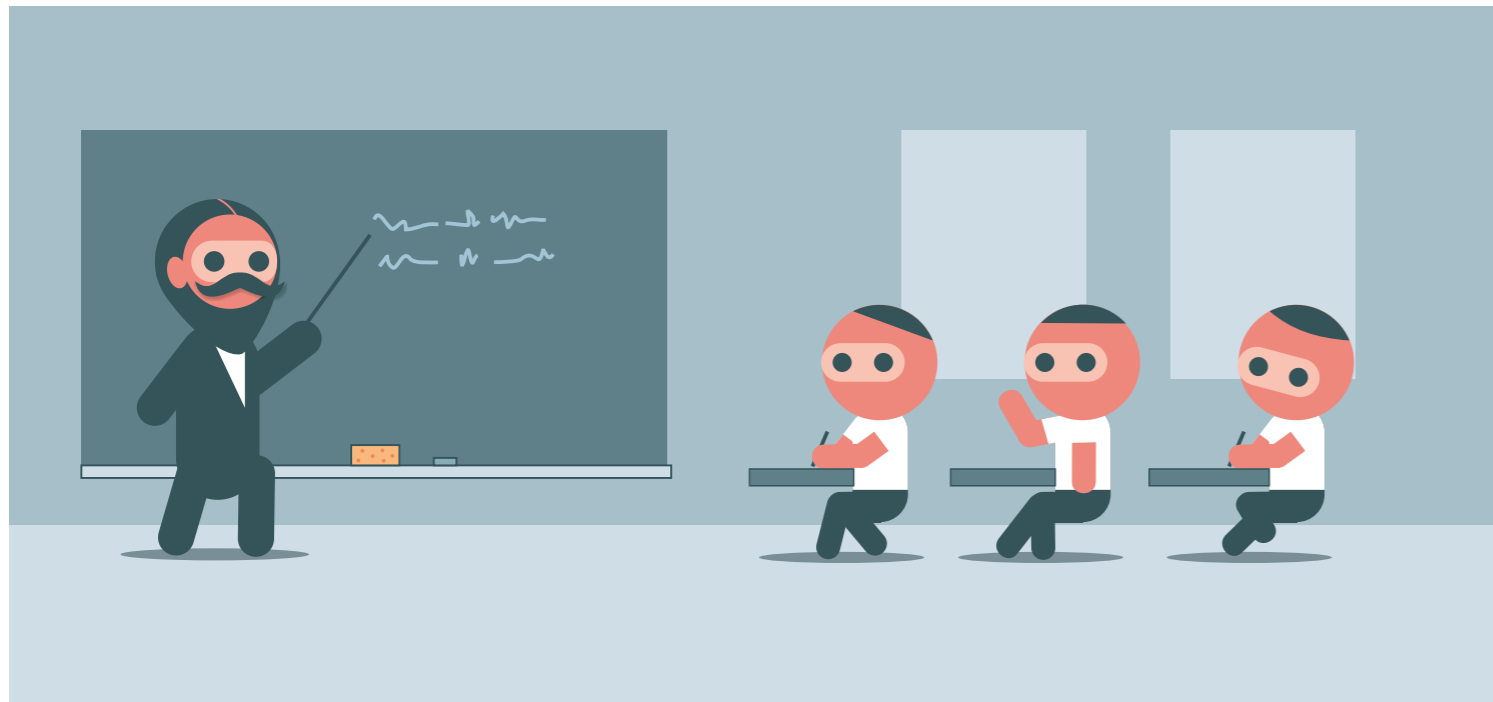
59 Ibid.

60 Algirdas Jakubčionis. Lietuvos žydai nepriklausomybės karuose. *Žydu kultūros paveldas Lietuvoje*. Ed. Alfredas Jomantas, Vilnius, 2005, 173.



Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona presents a new flag to the Kaunas chapter of the Jewish veterans of the War of Lithuanian Independence, 8 December 1934. Photograph: Mejeris Smežėchauskas, LCVA

The following Jewish founding volunteers are buried in the old Jewish Cemetery in Žaliakalnis: Samuel Kokner, Tzalel Grozhevsky, Chaim Yudelevich, Baruch Goldberg, Jacob Fein, David Bauman, and Bentzel Levit.



CREATING AN EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the first half of the 19th century, a comprehensive system of educational institutions was established on the former lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania controlled by the Russian Empire, creating a network of Talmud Torahs, cheders, batei midrash, and yeshivas to help educate young people to lead full, meaningful lives.¹

Talmud Torahs and cheders were religious primary schools. Talmud Torahs were mostly attended by children from less wealthy families and the schools were maintained by the community. Education at these schools was free and students also received financial support.

Cheders were maintained by students' parents while a cheder teacher, called a melamed, also acted as the cheder's owner and

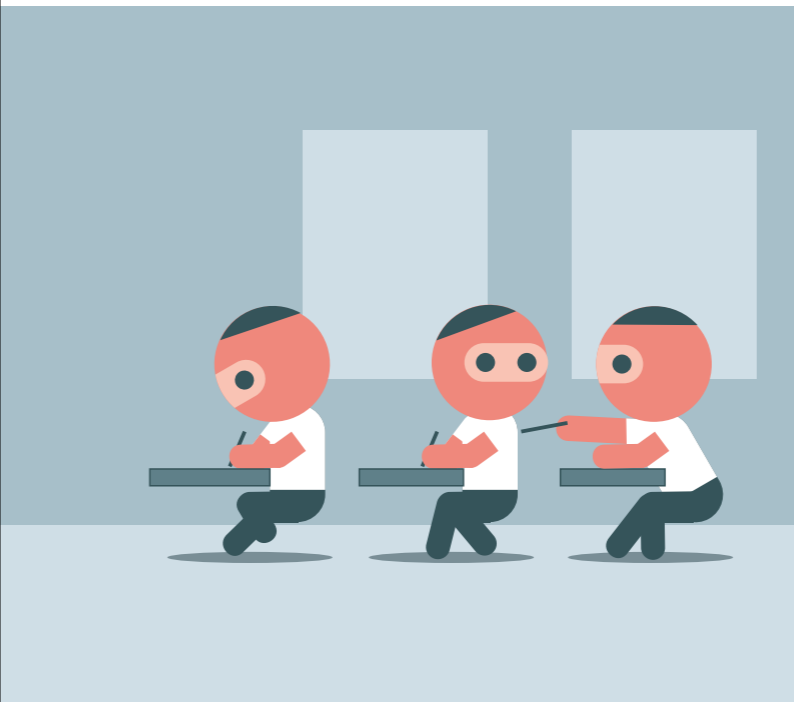
director. These schools were attended by children from more affluent families hoping to provide a better education than that offered in the community Talmud Torah schools.²

State-run schools for Jewish children began to appear in the mid-19th century and included instruction in the Russian language. Orthodox religious communities spoke out strongly against such schools, fearing that children attending such institutions would drift away from religion and a more traditional way of life. But, by the late 19th century, an increasing number of Jews chose to send their children to these public Russian-language schools, convinced that graduating from these institutions would eventually provide their children a higher position in society.³

1 Tamara Bairašauskaitė. Antano Muchlinskio Lietuvos žydų mokyklų vizitacijos XIX a. viduryje. „Žydų klausimas“ Lietuvoje XIX a. viduryje. Ed. Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, Vilnius, 2004, 130.

2 Abramav Gірšovičius. Žydų mokyklos Lietuvoje 1772–1859 metais. *Darbai ir Dienos*, t. 5(14), Kaunas, 1997, 261.

3 Henrika Ilgevič. Lietuvos žydų (litvakų) politinės ir kultūrinės veiklos aktyvėjimas, 200.



students, and the Talmud Torahs – 40. There are 38 primary cheders with 259 students and 10 secondary cheders with 69 boys and 18 girls attending.

From a visit report by Antanas Muchlinskis, 1852⁴

The education of Jewish girls began to be discussed in Kaunas in the late 19th century. Madam Plavina's private school for Jewish girls opened in the city in 1895. The school's opening ceremony included a performance by a state school Jewish choir directed by the Choral Synagogue's cantor. Congratulatory speeches underscored the great need for such a school in Kaunas: In a city with some 1,000 school-age Jewish girls, only 200 attended schools, so it was clear that the great majority of girls in the community were not receiving any education whatsoever.⁵

Several years later, a free evening school for Jewish women and girls opened its doors in 1898. The school's founder, R. L. Abramson, wrote:

Due to their economic situation, most Kaunas Jews have been deprived of the opportunity to give their children a basic education. Not only adults, but also children are forced from an early age to worry about their livelihood. . . . In this regard, the women among the poorest Jews live under particularly adverse conditions. Jewish girls in Kaunas have neither a public nor private school where they might obtain an education free of charge. The one functioning private girls' school is inaccessible for most.⁶

The Kaunas primary school had 41 students in 1851, and 45 one year later:

All of them came from the least affluent class. When a second-level commercial and industrial trade school opens, for which the Jews themselves have advocated, we can expect an increase in the number of students. Most don't send their children to the primary school because they've already learned the subjects taught there at home, and there are many such children in the city. Wealthy Jews don't send their children to the schools because they don't teach the Talmud. Students are admitted to the school throughout the year; only a quarter of them regularly attend class, including those who live in the Užupis suburb [Vilijampolė] and who, when the ferry service is interrupted in the autumn and spring, are forced to wait an hour or more on the riverbank. This shows that they have a desire to learn. Several children come from the neighboring town [Aleksotas] in the Kingdom of Poland. . . . In addition to the state schools, Kaunas also has two yeshivas and two Talmud Torahs; the yeshivas have 35

From its first year, the school was a great success. Many prospective students were rejected due the limited number of available places.⁷ In later years, the school had anywhere from 120 to 150 girls, ranging from 12 to 25 years old.⁸

4 Tamara Bairašauskaitė. Antano Muchlinskio Lietuvos žydų mokyklų vizitacijos XIX a. viduryje. „Žydų klausimas“ Lietuvoje XIX a. viduryje. Ed. Vladas Sirutavičius, Darius Staliūnas, Vilnius, 2004, 154.

5 Прибавление к Ковенским губернским ведомостям, 1895, № 3.

6 Отчет частной бесплатной вечерней школы для еврейских женщин и девиц в гор. Ковне, учрежденной Р.Л. Абрамсон за 1898. Ковна, 1899.

7 Отчет частной бесплатной вечерней школы для еврейских женщин и девиц в гор. Ковне, учрежденной Р.Л. Абрамсон за 1899. Ковна, 1900.

8 Отчет частной бесплатной вечерней школы для еврейских женщин и девиц в гор. Ковне, учрежденной Р.Л. Абрамсон за 1901–1902. Ковна, 1903.



THE RABBI AND HIS SCHOLAR.

The Rabbi and His Scholar. Isaac Levinsohn. *The Story of Isaac Levinsohn, a Polish Jew, Told by Himself*. London, [1888]



Students from the Kaunas Talmud Torah Society School. 1930s. LCVA



Students from the Kaunas Talmud Torah Society School. 1930s. LCVA

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

The Trud (Work) Trade School for girls opened in Kaunas in 1906 and specialized not only in training students for various professions, but also provided girls from poorer families a basic moral, mental, and physical education.⁹

In 1908, the Kaunas Jewish Hospital opened a school for Jewish midwives. The school admitted “married women and girls, regardless of rank or religion, who were at least 18 years old.”¹⁰

That same year, a chapter of the Russia-based ORT (*Obshchestvo Remeslenovo i Zemledelcheskovo Truda* – Society for Trades and Agricultural Labor) was established in Kaunas. The society began to support cooperatives and Jewish school art programs and established its own professional training schools.¹¹

ORT was founded in St. Petersburg in 1880 to develop the skills needed by impoverished Jews to find work.¹² With no professional skills or the right to lease land or obtain higher education, many Jews were condemned to a life of poverty. The founders of ORT included Jewish intellectuals, financiers, and industrialists who believed that professional training could help Jews survive in Russia. ORT’s mission was to provide such individuals with a chance to learn a trade or develop a foundation in agricultural work, thus giving them a means to escape the trap of pervasive poverty.¹³

Since 1908, the entire ORT organization had been led by Leon Bramson, a Kaunas-born activist, defender of Jewish civil rights, and representative of the Kaunas Governorate in the Russian Duma from 1906 to 1907. After leaving Russia in the wake of the revolution, Bramson helped establish an international ORT union in 1921 and was appointed the new organization’s president. ORT became one of the largest non-governmental education and training organizations in the world, helping impoverished communities become self-sustaining and economically independent.



The Kaunas Talmud Torah Society School (now No. 29 J. Gruodžio Street). 1930s. LCVA

After World War One, an ORT chapter was reestablished in Kaunas on February 7, 1921. The society helped organize professional training for young people and encouraged Jews to learn trades and agricultural work. Chapters, professional schools, and workshops opened across Lithuania, providing support to tradesmen in the form of agricultural schools and courses, as well as subsidies and loans for apprentices and farmers.

A Trade School was established in Kaunas in December 1921, providing a three-year academic program with Yiddish as the language of instruction. The school had departments in metalworking, sewing, and electrical engineering. An instructional

9 Устав Ковенского общества женской еврейской ремесленной школы “Труд” в гор. Ковне. Ковна, 1903

10 Устав повивальной школы при Ковенской Еврейской Больнице. Ковна, 1908.

11 Rachel Bracha. Apie „Word ORT“. *Parengti gyvenimui. ORT Lietuvoje. Parodos katalogas*. Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2013, 5.

12 Ibid., 4.

13 Ibid.



The ORT School (now No. 66 Jonavos Street, Kaunas) in 1936. From a 1937 ORT Society calendar, LNMMB Judaica Collection

workshop was also opened, providing training in practical skills and the production of metalworks and devices commissioned by factories in Kaunas. Jacob Oleiski was appointed the school’s director in 1929.¹⁴

The school was reorganized in 1932. The institution was granted secondary trade school rights and the academic program was extended to four years. The school was maintained by the ORT Society, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, and the Kaunas City

Municipality. The school also held evening classes for artisans, providing instruction in arithmetic, geometry, chemistry, drawing, machine work, Yiddish, Lithuanian, and other subjects.¹⁵

1936. *The Jewish ORT Society built a “Jewish Works Center” on Jonavos Street where some 500 Jewish children and teenagers learned trades at a secondary trade school or as part of various other courses. . . . The ORT School is nearly the only place where Jewish young people can receive proper instruction in the trades, obtaining an education equivalent to a general school. This school has already*

14 Kauno ORT. *Parengti gyvenimui. ORT Lietuvoje. Parodos katalogas*. Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2013, 19.

15 Ibid., 15.



The ORT School workshop. Kaunas. 1928–1929. *mannbary.net*

graduated several classes, all with a good reputation in Lithuania and abroad. ORT school graduates are very highly respected everywhere. . . . Lithuanian government bodies have always viewed this most essential institution most favorably and we hope they will continue to support it in future, providing moral and material support, without which it could not exist.

The Jewish Works Center. *Apžvalga*, 1936¹⁶

Over nearly twenty years of its existence, the school trained some 1,000 qualified artisans. In the autumn of 1940, in the early days of the first Soviet occupation (when the ORT Society's activities had already been suspended), private trade schools were closed

and replaced with state-run institutions. The ORT Society's secondary trade school became the Kaunas 4th State Trade School, with instruction in Yiddish.¹⁷ The renamed school was closed in 1941, at the start of the Nazi occupation.

¹⁶ Žydų darbo namai. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. gegužės 17 d., 7.

¹⁷ Kauno ORT. *Parengti gyvenimui. ORT Lietuvoje*, 15.



The Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium (now No. 85 Kęstučio Street). 1930s. Photograph: Juozas Stanišauskas, KAVB

JEWISH GYMNASIUMS

After the Germans occupied Kaunas in 1915, a Jewish Real Gymnasium was opened in the city, with German as the predominant instructional language. Students were also permitted to have several hours of instruction in Hebrew. Religious studies were also included in the curriculum.¹⁸ After 1919, the school was renamed the Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium.

During World War One, the Tsarist government treated Lithuania's Jews as disloyal citizens and deported a great majority of them to locations across Russia. After war's end, they began returning in droves to Lithuania, which became an independent state in 1918.

¹⁸ Leah Reines. *The Older Sister of the Gymnasium. A Palace That Sank (The Schwabe Gymnasium of Kovno Lithuania Yizkor Book)*. Ed. Y[Israel]. Yablukovsky, Tel Aviv, 1962. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kaunas1/kau024.html>

The process of setting up a network of Jewish schools, elementary and secondary, received impetus and strong encouragement at that albeit short but important period. . . . The leaders of the new government then declared, and publicly obligated themselves, [stating] that the Jews of Lithuania would enjoy not only political rights as citizens, but would with the support of the government be able to address their national needs through their own chosen institutions.

This was the "ideal" period in the relationship of the Lithuanian majority towards the Jewish minority. It created a perfect climate for establishing all kinds of [autonomous] Jewish national institutions. Foremost of them was a network of schools where the language of instruction was Hebrew and in some cases Yiddish.



Students of the Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium. 1938. USHMM

The Jewish elementary schools were integrated into the country's general network of schools. This resulted in unlimited financial support and provided their teachers with the status of government employees. The Jewish high schools were also recognized by the Lithuanian government, but its financial support of them was negligible.

Graduates of the Jewish high schools were generally accepted to institutions of higher learning in the country. There was practically no discrimination between them and graduates of the Lithuanian high schools.

L. Gorfinkle¹⁹

19 Dr. L. Gorfinkle. *A Link in the Chain. A Palace That Sank (The Schwabe Gymnasium of Kovno Lithuania Yizkor Book)*. Ed. Y[Israel]. Yablockovsky, Tel Aviv, 1962. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kaunas1/kau005.html#Page 20>.

By the 1920s, many in the Kaunas Jewish community were enrolled in German and Russian secondary schools. In 1927, for example, Jews made up 30 percent of the students at the Kaunas Teachers' Society Russian Gymnasium. One such student, Elis Rochelson, remembered his non-Jewish classmates thus: "We went out together, met up with each other, and there [were] no signs of antisemitism, or any hostility. . . . It was a very neat, close-knit group, the students and the teachers."²⁰

A somewhat different atmosphere prevailed at the Kaunas German Gymnasium: "My parents at first wanted me to go to the German gymnasium in Kovno, which was fashionable at that time. My grandmother fiercely objected to it. After the first antisemitic

20 Meri-Jane Rochelson. *Eli's Story: A Twentieth-Century Jewish Life*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2018, 54.



Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium students with their teachers. 1936. USHMM

incident at school, I was promptly transferred to a private Hebrew gymnasium, where all the children and teachers were Jewish."²¹

The creation of an independent education system was one of the Jewish community's greatest achievements during the interwar period. By the early 1920s, three main networks of Jewish schools had emerged: Tarbut (providing secular instruction in Hebrew), Yavne (Orthodox Jewish schools with lessons in Hebrew), and the Cultural League (secular schools taught in Yiddish). The different school systems were the result of different approaches to religion and differences in linguistic preference between Hebrew and Yiddish.²²

21 William W. Mishell. *Kaddish for Kovno: Life and Death in a Lithuanian Ghetto, 1941–1945*. Chicago Review Press, 1988, 3.

22 Benediktas Šetkus. Kauno žydų gimnazija dėstomąja lietuvių kalba: vokiečių ir žydų konfrontacijos darinys. *Lituanistica*, 2019, t. 65. nr. 2(116), 73.

The Kaunas chapter of the Jewish Cultural Union was established in 1919 with the aim of uniting those in Jewish society who viewed the Yiddish language as the most important factor in the development and growth of Jewish cultural life. When establishing schools, the association mostly promoted the interests of the Jewish working class, but it did not limit itself solely to educational and cultural activities, but also became involved in politics affiliated with the communist movement, as a result of which the association was banned in 1924.²³

23 Benediktas Šetkus. Training of Teachers for Jewish Elementary Schools in Lithuania, 1919–1940. *Istorija: mokslo darbai*, t. 106, nr. 2. Vilnius, 2017, 33, 55.



The Kaunas Schwabe Hebrew Gymnasium (now No. 11 Karaliaus Mindaugo Prospektas). 1930s. Photograph: Juozas Stanišauskas, KAVB

TARBUT

The Tarbut (“culture”) Society established secular schools with classes taught in Hebrew.

*This school, created adhering to principles of universal education and global and European civic spirit, on the one hand, but also to provide a religious and ethnic education, preserves the most precious ethical principles of a nation possessing both ancient and new culture, simultaneously adhering to the latest demands of pedagogical science and the realities of life.*²⁴

24 LCVA, f. 552, ap. 1, b. 80.

A Hebrew Gymnasium was established in 1920, with the new institution’s teachers’ council unanimously inspired to create a modern, ethnic Hebrew school. Led by Moses Shwabe, widely recognized as a leading authority by his fellow educators, the school’s teachers began to develop a new generation of students in the spirit of a reborn Hebrew culture. One of the school’s most famous graduates was the poet Lea Goldberg.

The Hebrew High School (Gymnasium) in Kovno, popularly known as the “Schwabe Gymnasium”, was a link in the chain of Hebrew educational institutions in Lithuania that resulted from working against

great challenges, with enormous effort and extraordinary dedication. This chain established in Lithuania an active Jewish community with Jewish national awareness that was not broken until the very end.

Aaron Berman²⁵

A new building for the school was constructed in 1926–1927, located at present-day No. 11 Karaliaus Mindaugo Prospektas.

In the 1930s, the Tarbut Society opened children’s nurseries in Kaunas at Vilniaus Street 17 and Linkuvos Street 45B. The centers functioned as: “1. A place of education for small children (below primary school age, i.e., 4–6 years old), whose parents were poor and unable to send their children to more affluent nursery schools. 2. Prepare children for primary school in which Hebrew is the language of instruction.”²⁶

The Yavne Society, established in Kaunas on April 22, 1922, opened Jewish Orthodox schools with Hebrew-language programs. The purpose of the society was to “organize and manage the education of Jewish youth in the traditional Jewish spirit,”²⁷ and thus the Yavne association established and supported Jewish academic and educational agencies and institutions. The Yavne Real Gymnasium for Jewish girls was established in Kaunas in 1925. Beginning on September 1, 1931, the society was allowed to open and independently maintain a ten-year secondary school in Kaunas for boys with special instruction in Judaica subjects.²⁸

The Or (“light”) Society, founded in 1924, supported the Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium, “whose purpose was to provide society members’ children with a general and Jewish education in Hebrew.”²⁹ At the start of construction of the new Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium building in 1930, its director Tzemach Feldstein observed:

I am happy to see the rapid construction in recent years of new educational institutions for Lithuanian and minority children. Until now,

25 Dr. Aaron Berman. *On the Origin of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Kovno. A Palace That Sank (The Schwabe Gymnasium of Kovno Lithuania Yizkor Book)*. Ed. Y[Israel]. Yablokovsky, Tel Aviv, 1962. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kaunas1/kau005.html#Page8>.

26 LCVA, f. 552, ap. 2, b. 75.

27 LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 179.

28 LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 179.

29 LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 283.

„Tarbut”o
ŽYDŲ VAIKŲ DARŽELIS
Ožeškienės g-vė 2.

Primami 4–6 m. am. vaikai

Vaikai registruojami kasdien nuo 9–4 val. „Tarbut”o raštinėje.

(II) העברייאישער קינדער-גארטן „תרבות”
אזעשקא גאס 2.

עס ווערן אנגענומען קינדער אין עלטער פון 4–6 יאר
אין „תרבות” קינדער-גארטן

וועלכער געפינט זיך אונטער דער לייטונג פון
א געניטער דיפלאמירטער פּרעפּעליסטן אין אונטער דער השגחה פון
„תרבות” און צווייטער מריצע פּרעפּעליסטן (הויפט) אין קאונאס.

שכר למוד-15 ליט א מאנאט
(שוויי קינדער פון איין משפחה צאלן 25 ליט)

פארשרייבן קינדער פון 8 ביז 4 אין בירדזש פון „רנרבורג” (ווינקער 4-טעלעקאן 26-28)
Kauo emzėnuos kėla, Spausdint „Laimė” Kaunas, Lignagaivė g-vė 13.

An announcement by the Tarbut Society. LNMMB Judaica Collection

*the Kaunas Jewish Real Gymnasium, the Jewish school with the most students in Lithuania, had to continue its work in cramped apartments. Today, we lay the cornerstone for a new school building which will meet the needs of contemporary pedagogy and hygiene.*³⁰

The gymnasium’s new building (today designated as No. 85 Kęstučio Street) was officially consecrated on August 30, 1931.

Kaunas also had a Jewish school with instruction in the Lithuanian language in the 1930s.

30 Didžiausia Lietuvoj žydų gimnazija. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1930 m. spalio 14 d. 4.



Students of the Kaunas Yavne Jewish Real Gymnasium for Girls with their teacher. 1929. Yad Vashem Archives

The serious approach of the teaching staff and the [school's] superior level of education has been acknowledged by both official agencies and the Jewish community. It is not surprising, then, that the number of students at the school has increased every year. With instruction in Lithuanian, the Kaunas Jewish Gymnasium has demonstrated that speculation regarding the supposed denationalization of Jewish children is unfounded. Both the school's leadership and the entire teaching staff seeks to raise not only good citizens for the country, but also responsible and beneficial members of the Jewish community. The gymnasium offers a broad program in the Hebrew language and literature and

Jewish history. The Jewish language has also not been overlooked. It is clear to the school's leadership that, in these times, every responsible Jewish intellectual must know how to speak and write in the language of the Jewish people, Yiddish, and must be as familiar with the rich literature written in the Jewish tongue as they are with ancient Jewish cultural sources and the modern Hebrew language.

Examinations Have Been Completed. *Apžvalga*, 1936³¹

31 Baigti patikrinamieji egzaminai. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. rugsėjo 6 d., 5.



Students of the Yavne Society School with their teachers. Kaunas. 1929. USHMM

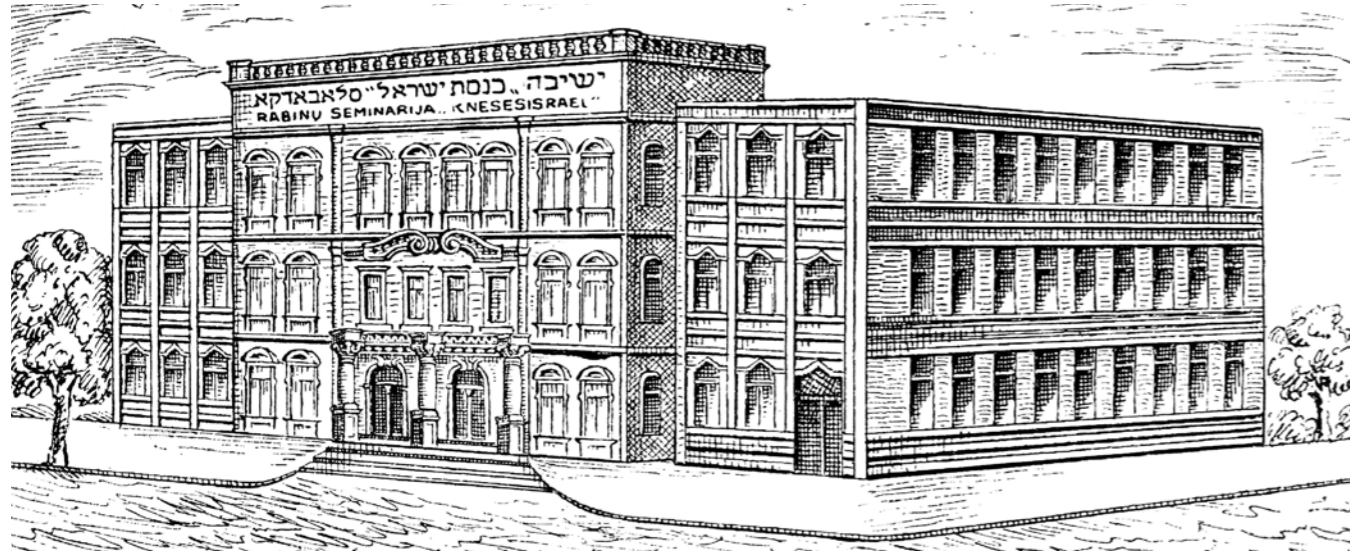
In 1940, during the first Soviet occupation, schools taught in Hebrew were closed or forced to convert to Yiddish-language schools,³² which were subsequently dissolved after the onset of the Nazi occupation.

A Yiddish-language school reopened in 1944, at the start of the second Soviet occupation. Primary School No. 14, whose students were mostly Jewish orphans, was ordered closed by the Soviet

government in 1950, prior to which it had been led by Chaim Gertner, with instruction given by teachers Sheina Gertner, Yelena Chatkellis, and Berl London.³³

32 Dr. Aaron Berman. On the Origin of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Kovno.

33 KRVA, f. R-369, ap. 6, b. 5, l. 83.



A design for the new building of the Knesses Yisrael Yeshiva in Vilijampolė. 1935. LNMMB Judaica Collection

THE VILIJAMPOLĖ YESHIVA

The Vilijampolė Yeshiva, a Jewish seminary, functioned from the 1830s to 1941 and was one of the largest and best-known yeshivas in Europe. One of the school's buildings survives to this day, at No. 51 Panerių Street.

Around 1881, one of the yeshiva's founders, Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, established a new type of yeshiva in Vilijampolė, which soon assumed an important role in Lithuania. N. T. Finkel was a student of Yisrael Salanter (founder of the Vilijampolė Yeshiva and Mussar movement) and a proponent of the Mussar movement who supported the idea that Talmud studies must be accompanied by systematic ethical education.

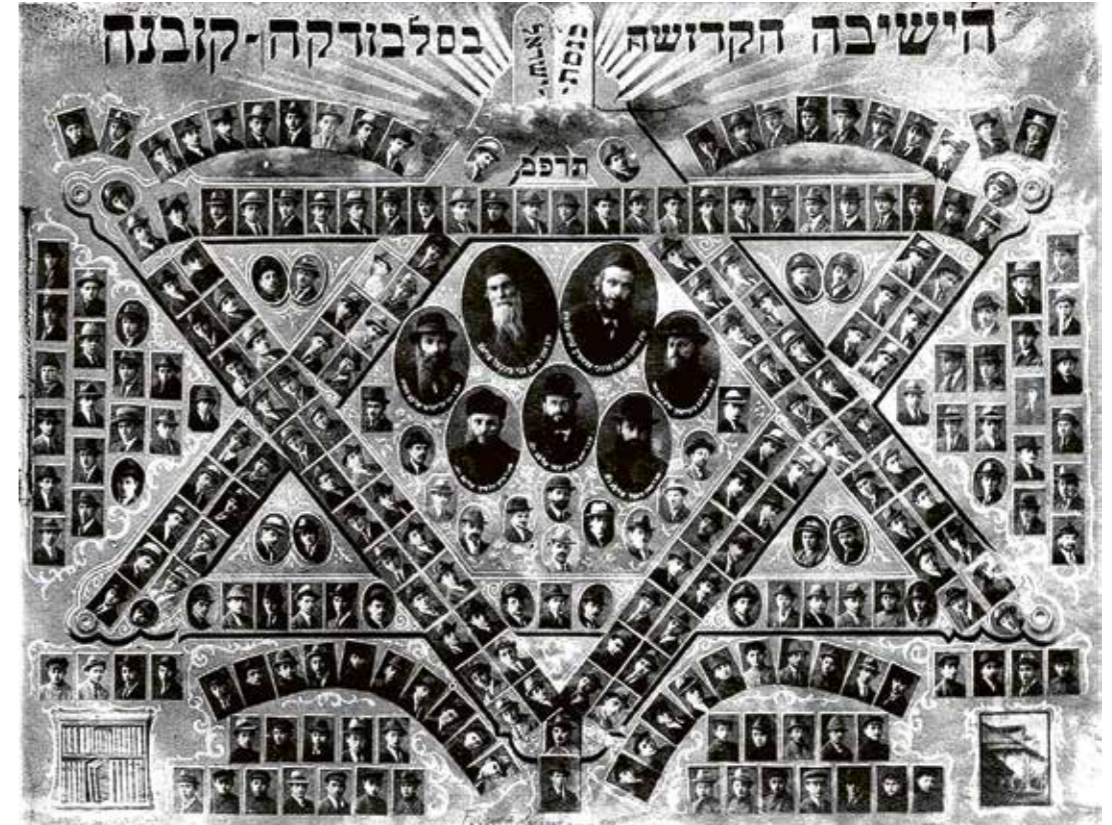
In 1897, opinions at the yeshiva diverged concerning Mussar movement studies within the school's program. Since most students opposed such training, N. T. Finkel and his supporters broke from the school and organized a new yeshiva named Knesses Yisrael (Community of Israel), to honor Salanter. The older yeshiva with its remaining students was named Knesses Beit Yitzhak, in memory of Kaunas rabbi Isaac Elkhana Spektor.³⁴

By the late 1930s and into 1940, the Knesses Yisrael yeshiva was attended by more than 300 young Jews from England, Finland, Germany, Latvia, the United States, and other countries. A Lithuanian journalist wrote about his impressions of the yeshiva after a visit in the late 1920s:

In Slabada, in Vilijampolė, on narrow Stiklo Street there stands a rather large wooden building accessed through a courtyard. There one can see a constant flow of all sorts of bearded rabbis and young, bright, intelligent-looking people, entering and leaving the building and gathering in the courtyard. Upon entering, one finds a large, spacious hall full of young people, with or without beards, each of them seated at their own desks with a large Talmud study book. They are constantly moving, their bodies swaying, reading aloud together from the book's texts. All of them wear hats. There is a great, constant noise in the hall, much like a machine-filled factory. To a bystander, the hall makes a strange impression. This special building is the world-famous Vilijampolė rabbinical seminary, which the Jews of all nations respectfully call the "Slabodker Yeshiva" . . . The most famous Jewish religious scholars hail from the Slabodke Yeshiva. . . .

The entire life of the seminarians is bound to the yeshiva. The daily schedule is as follows: From 7:30 to 8:30 am – morning prayer; from

³⁴ Yeshiva of Slobodka. https://jivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Slobodka_Yeshiva_of.



Vilijampolė Yeshiva rabbis and students. 1922. Wikimedia Commons

10 to 2 o'clock and from 4 to 7 o'clock – Talmud studies; from 8:30 in the evening to 9 o'clock pm, Mussar; followed by evening prayer. . . . The Slabodke yeshiva is considered the center of religious study by Jews around the world."

G. Valkauskas. A World-Famous Jewish Academic Center In Slabada. *Diena*, 1929³⁵

The world sometimes delights us with Olympic games. Sometimes, select strong men and those in peak physical shape gather to show off their strength. They demonstrate the nimblest of legs, the mightiest fists, the strongest muscles. They lift weights, clash with their fists, run, and jump – with every country wanting to show off the power

³⁵ G. Valkauskas. Pasauliniai garsūs žydų mokslo centras – Slabadoj. *Diena*, 1929 m. rugšėjo 8 d., 2.

and bravery of their strongest sons. We Jews should also organize our Olympics – a specifically Jewish Olympics – according to our own essential being. It shouldn't be a physical Olympics, but a spiritual one. . . . We could show off the Talmudists from Slabodkė, who know the Talmud "by the needle". All one has to do is point a needle at a given place in the Talmud, and they can tell you the precise word that falls in the same spot on the following pages. These were our champions.

Tunkeler. A Jewish Olympics (A Feuilleton). *Apžvalga*, 1936³⁶

³⁶ Tunkeler. Žydų olimpijada (feljetonas). *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. rugpjūčio 23 d., 4.



Class of 1924 at the Jewish Higher Education Course. Kaunas. VGŽIM, *limis.lt*

HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES

In 1921, the newly established Society to Promote Higher Jewish Education in Lithuania organized evening courses for the training of teachers for higher education institutions. In its first years, the society set up divisions for instruction in mathematics and the natural sciences, history, philosophy, and juridical economics, later adding courses in technical studies to train mechanics and

machine workers.³⁷ Courses were taught by the famous Jewish literary critic Dr. Israel Isidor Elyashev (who wrote under the pen name Baal Makhshoves).³⁸

³⁷ LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 783.

³⁸ LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 766.



Aminadav Levinas' student ID card. Kaunas, Vytautas Magnus University, 1932. LCVA

JEWISH STUDENTS AT VYTAUTAS MAGNUS UNIVERSITY

The University of Lithuania was founded in Kaunas in 1922 and renamed Vytautas Magnus University in 1930. Jewish higher education courses gradually lost their significance as many talented young Jews took advantage of the opportunity to study at this newly established academic institution. From its earliest days, the university included a Department of Semitology, led from 1927 by the renowned semitologist and Jewish literary historian Chaim Nachman Shapiro.

Jewish student societies and fraternities were active for various lengths of time at the university. One of the first was the University of Lithuania Students' Jewish Society for the Promotion of the Hebrew Language and Literature, later renamed Al HaMishmar (On Guard). Established in 1923, the society sought to unite Jews to support Hebrew culture, learn the Hebrew language, and conduct research of Hebrew literature. The society

organized lectures and seminars on issues pertaining to Hebrew literature and language.³⁹ A similar association for the Support of the Jewish Language and Literature was founded at the university in 1924.

In the late 1930s, the university also had a Lithuanian and Jewish Cultural Cooperation Society, and 1936 saw the emergence of a Semitologists' Society and a Jewish Students' Association of Zionist Revisionists. Many societies were disbanded in 1938 after it was determined they had failed to meet minimum membership requirements.

³⁹ Simona Šimkutė. Nachanas Chaimas Šapira ir žydų kultūros studijos nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje. *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*. Ed. Antanas Andrijauskas. Vilnius, 2013, 536.



Members of the Betar Kaunas Jewish Youth Organization. 1930s. LCVA

The first Jewish fraternity, Vetaria, was established at the university in 1924, and aspired to:

Organize Jewish students on the basis of discipline, ethnic education, self-respect, and deep friendship Being non-political and non-partisan, Vetaria was able to attract students of various political persuasions sharing a common appreciation for overarching Jewish academic and national interests, and for which the fraternity pledged to be vigilant throughout its activities.

The Anniversary of the Vetaria Jewish Student Fraternity. *Apžvalga*, 1937⁴⁰

Fraternity members actively participated in charitable projects.

The Jordania Jewish fraternity was founded at the university in 1925.

The fraternity has succeeded in creating its own traditions and customs, the essence of which is truly academic and infused with the spirit of the Jewish people. . . . The fraternity takes a serious approach to the national education of its members. The Jordania fraternity plays an important role in the lives of Jewish students. It actively participates in the university's academic life.

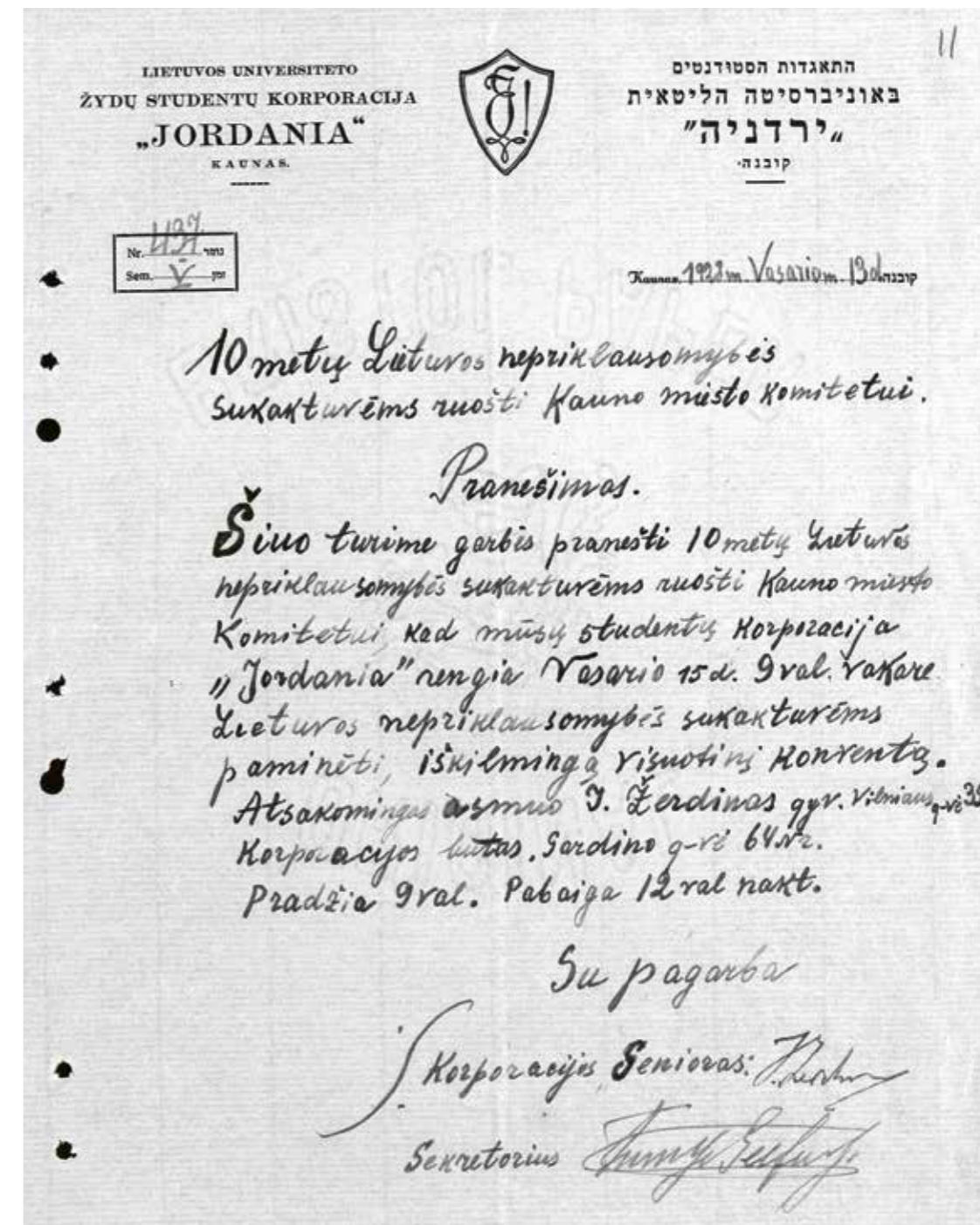
The 10th Anniversary of the Jordania Fraternity. *Apžvalga*, 1936⁴¹

In the 1930s, the university had at least eight Jewish fraternities, but the number of Jewish students enrolled at the institution began to decline due to both economic and political considerations.

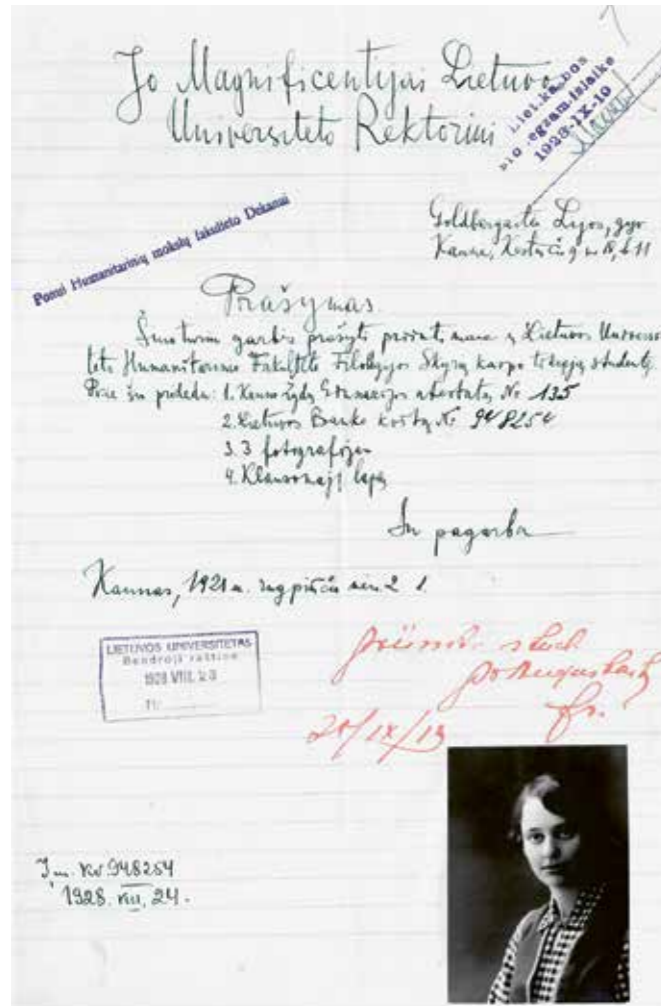
But the question arises: How do Jewish students make a living? From where do they obtain the necessary funds? As the old Jewish saying goes: "Where there is no flour, there is no education." There is an answer [to this question], and it is well known by Kaunas Jewish society

40 Žydų studentų korporacijos „Vetarija“ sukaktuvės. *Apžvalga*, 1937 gruodžio 26 d., 5.

41 Studentų korporacijos „Jordanija“ 10 metų sukaktuvės. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. vasario 16 d., 7.



A report about the commemoration of Lithuanian Independence Day by the Jordania Jewish Fraternity at the University of Lithuania. Kaunas. 13 February 1928. KRVA

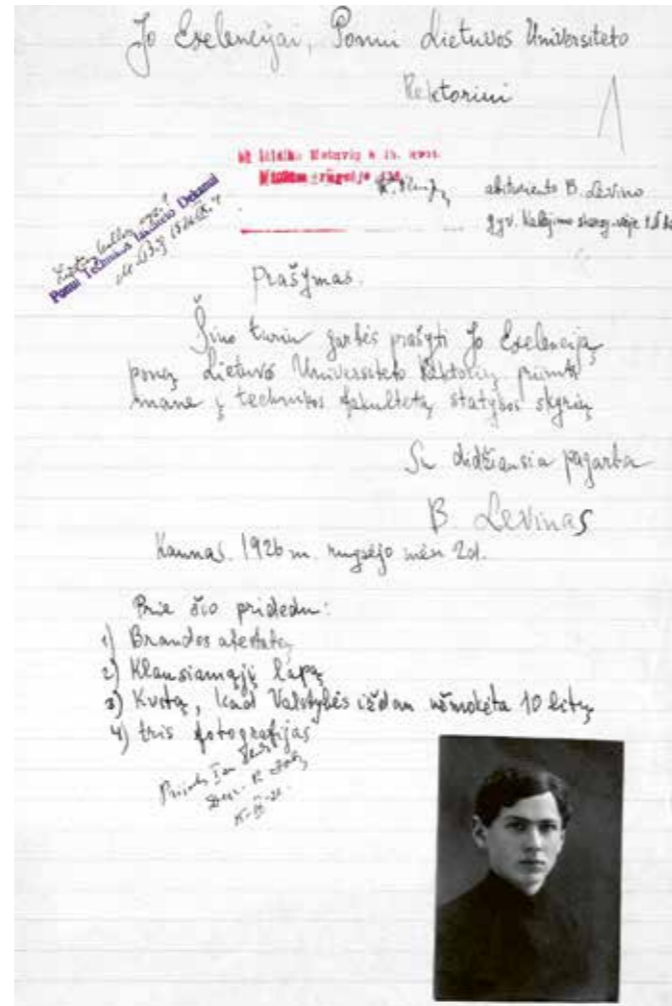


A request by Lea Goldberg addressed to the rector of the University of Lithuania. 1928. LCVA

and by the mothers and fathers in Kaunas. The answer is: lessons. These lessons are the true salvation for Jewish students. And it is for good reason that students consider themselves so fortunate to get lessons. A great number of Jewish students make a living through lessons.

E. Kravetz, The Social Circumstances of VMU Students. *Apžvalga*, 1936⁴²

42 E. Kravetas. Socijalinė V. D. U. žydų studentų būklė. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. vasario 9 d., 7.



A request by Boris Levinas addressed to the rector of the University of Lithuania. Kaunas. 1928. LCVA

Several student support societies existed in the 1920s. In 1924, the University of Lithuania Jewish Students' Cultural Union was reorganized as the University of Lithuania Jewish Students' Academic Union, with a mission to "provide material assistance for Jewish students in their struggle to obtain a higher education."⁴³

43 E. Kravetas. V. D. U-to žydų Studentų Ekonominis Susivienijimas. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. lapkričio 22 d., 3.



In 1927, the academic union was renamed the University of Lithuania Jewish Students' Economic Union and provided loans to Jewish students and organized the creation of a Jewish students' canteen. In an overview of the social condition of students in 1936, E. Kravetz wrote: "The number of loans is increasing in proportion to the number of members; in other words, the number of poor students among economic union members increases every year. . . . Should we be at all surprised, then, by the catastrophic decline in the number of Jewish students?"⁴⁴

But the decreasing enrollment of Jewish students at the university was not just the result of economic considerations:

The public has learned the main ideas outlined in the memorandum by the Jewish Economic Students' Union presented to the university's leadership regarding practical restrictions on Jews seeking admission to the Faculty of Medicine. In various countries and at different higher education institutions, the very poor experience Jews have had in regard to admission to such schools also stems from the attitude displayed toward them by the leading bodies of

44 E. Kravetas. Socijalinė V. D. U. žydų studentų būklė, 7.

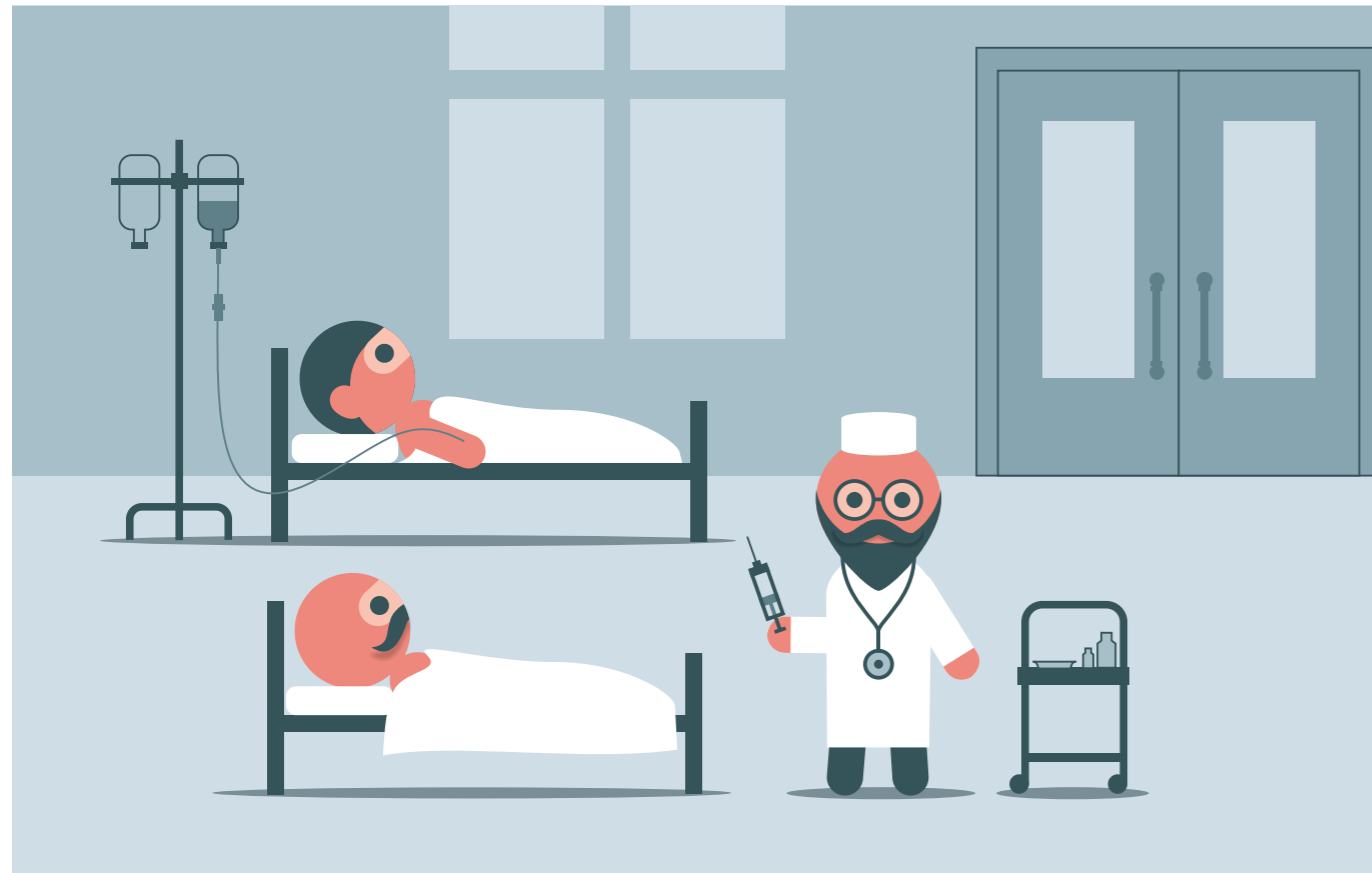
| Sėmės | | tras. 192 | | Mokymo metų 1928 m. | |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Mokymo metais | Pratimai paraiši | Pratimai paraiši | Užduotys patalpas | Užduotys patalpas | Užduotys patalpas |
| 1928-29 | 2 | Logot | | | |
| 1929-30 | 1 | Logot | | | |
| 1930-31 | 2 | Studijos | | | |
| 1931-32 | 4 | Studijos | | | |
| 1932-33 | 2 | Pratimai | | | |
| 1933-34 | 2 | Pratimai | | | |
| 1934-35 | 3 | Užduotys | | | |
| 1935-36 | 2 | Pratimai | | | |
| 1936-37 | 2 | Pratimai | | | |

Lea Goldberg's class record. Kaunas, University of Lithuania. 1928–1930. LCVA

those institutions. Can anyone fully describe the burdens, suffering, and appalling hatred that Jewish young people must endure in their pursuit of an education? But Lithuania does not fall into this category of countries. In Lithuania, people are justifiably angered when someone tries to include Lithuania in the category of brutal, antisemitic countries. The difficult question then arises: What are we to make of the prevailing tradition at the University of Lithuania whereby Jews find it nearly impossible to be admitted to the medical school and that, for the second year in a row, not a single Jew has been admitted to the dentistry unit? Is it truly permissible from a higher national perspective that, even as Jews, whose [primary] schools are all private, are given privileged access to public secondary schools, they are essentially denied the right to study at institutions of higher learning?

The Jewish Press on University Admissions of Graduating Jewish Students. *Apžvalga*, 1937⁴⁵

45 Žydų spauda dėl žydų abiturientų įstojimo į universitetą. *Apžvalga*, 1937 m. spalio 3 d., 4.



HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANIZATIONS

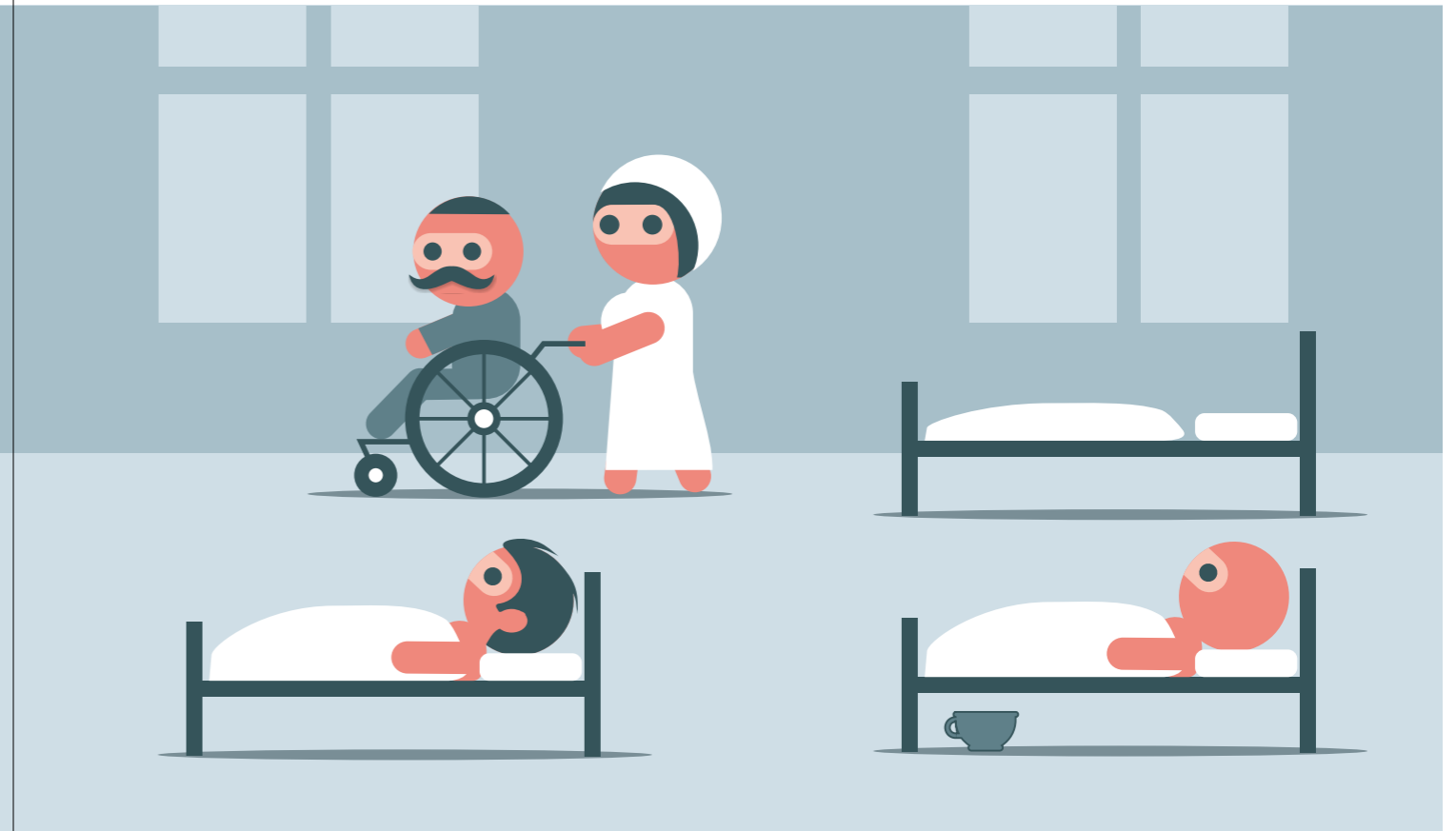
The Kaunas Jewish community devoted considerable attention to caring for its less fortunate members, including orphans and the sick. To provide better assistance, efforts were not limited solely to funds raised by the community, but also included the creation of special-purpose societies.

One of the first such societies in Kaunas was the so-called Podpora padayushchim, or “Support for the fallen”, established in 1873.¹

In 1898, a group of wealthy Kaunas women and wives of factory owners and merchants sent an appeal to the city government:

Everyone who has become more closely aware of the plight of the poorest class in Kaunas knows the horrible, and thus hopeless plight of Jewish women in the event of disease, childbirth, death of a family member, or similar situations. The situation is no better for children among the poorest residents in Kaunas who, in addition to the most basic material needs, also lack the opportunity to learn a trade, so that they might later earn their own bread. We, the undersigned, have often encountered the frightening situation

¹ LVIA, f. 378, ap. BS1870, b. 957.



*of poor Jewish women and children and we have seen how support provided by one person in such situations is insufficient or fails to achieve its purpose due to a lack of organization or internal divisions. We therefore believe that we must establish a society to improve the material and moral condition of poor women, widows, new mothers, and children.*²

The appeal led to the creation in Kaunas of a Jewish women's charitable society, whose ranks were soon also joined by men,

² KRVA, f. I-50, ap. 1, b. 23701.

mostly doctors offering medical care free of charge. By 1901, nearly four hundred Kaunas residents had become involved in the activities of the society, contributing various amounts of donated funds, providing assistance to an ever-larger number of poor women and children.

The Rabbi I. E. Spektor Home for Jewish Orphans opened in Kaunas in 1905 on Ugniagesių Street (at what is today No. 25 J. Gruodžio Street).³ The Jewish Children's Colony Society

³ LVIA, f. 378, ap. BS1904, b. 67.



was established in 1901 to improve health care for poor Jewish children.⁴

Various Kaunas societies organized concerts, plays, walks, and other events to raise funds through ticket sales and donations to support the poorer members of society. A dance evening was

held at the Versalis Restaurant in December 1898, to raise funds for a Jewish elder care home and, in 1906, the Jewish Music and Drama Art Lovers Society organized a concert at the city theatre to raise funds for the poor.

Some of the health care and social welfare societies founded in the 19th century renewed their activities in the interwar period, which also saw the creation of other organizations, including:

⁴ KRVA, f. I-53, ap. 1, b. 145.



The Jewish Children's Home (now No. 8 Giedraičių Street). Jewish Children's Home calendar for 1936–37. Kaunas, 1936. LNMMB Judaica Collection

*the Jewish Orphaned Girls' Shelter Society, established in Kaunas in 1931, to care for and support poor Jewish girls. The society opened a shelter to care for the orphaned girls, where over thirty orphans received support and education free of charge. [The shelter] also admitted girls from the poorest, parentless families. All of the orphan girls were of primary school age and attended schools in Kaunas.*⁵

⁵ LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 495.

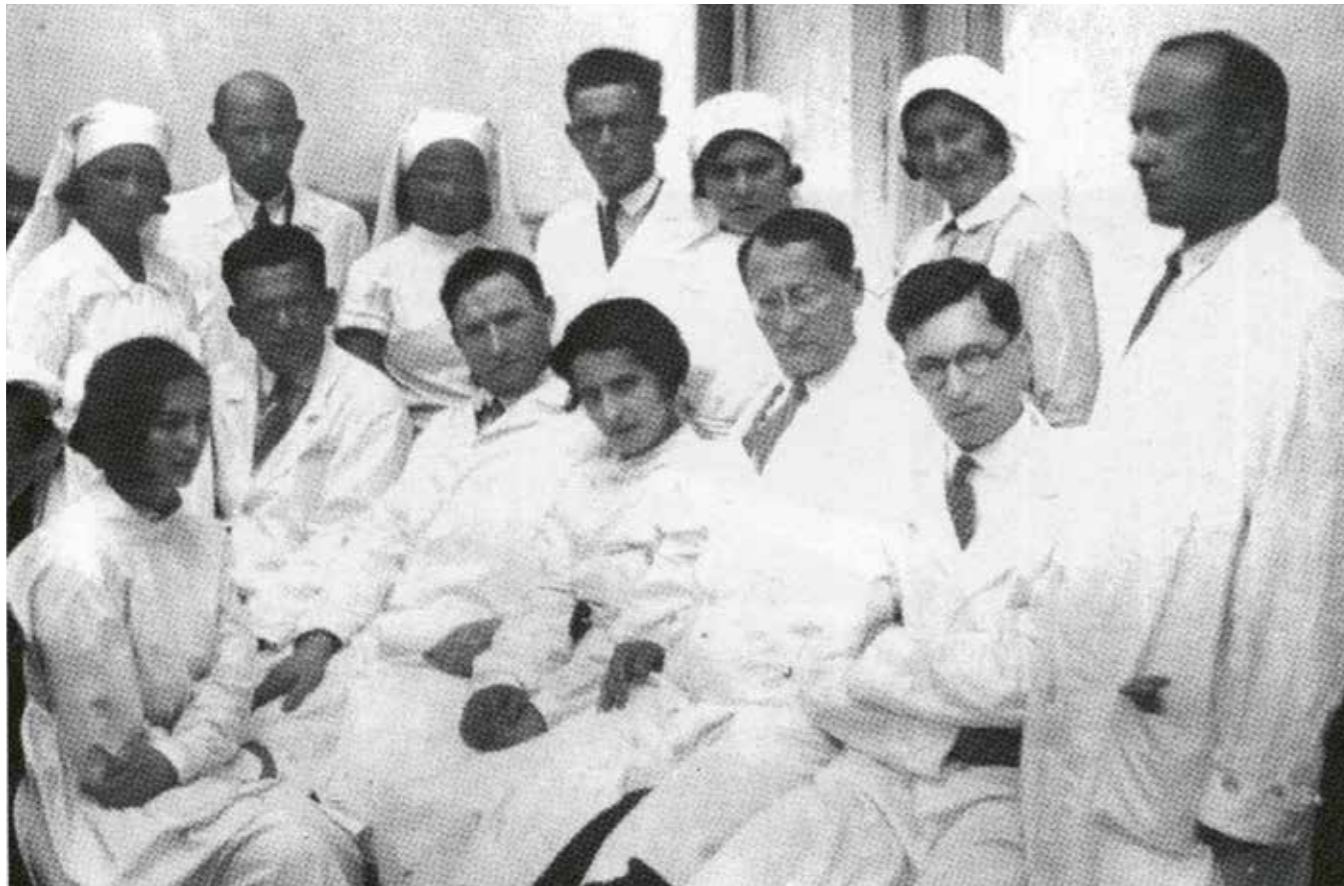
The activities of such children's homes and societies were disrupted by the start of the Second World War.



Children at the Rabbi Isaac Elkhanan Spektor Orphan's Home (now No. 25 J. Gruodžio Street), holding a portrait of the rabbi. Kaunas. 6 July 1925. LCVA



Donation slips from various Kaunas Jewish societies and organizations. 1920s-1930s. NČDM



Elkhanan Elkes with staff at the Kaunas Jewish Hospital's Internal Diseases Unit. 1936.
Joel Elkes. *Dr. Elkhanan Elkes of the Kovno Ghetto: A Son's Holocaust Memoir*.
Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 1999.

THE JEWISH HOSPITAL

The Kaunas Jewish Hospital began operating in the first half of the 19th century, at the Soloveichik home.⁶ But conditions in the wooden building were not suitable for proper health care, so it was decided in the mid-19th century to build a new hospital, located at what is today No. 5 A. Jakšto Street. The Kaunas Jewish Hospital continued to function in the interwar period, offering treatment to non-Jews as well.

⁶ LCVA, f. 378, f. BS1883, b. 711.

The Kaunas Jewish Bichur-Cholim Hospital, which now has 220 beds, occupies an important place among Lithuania's hospitals. The hospital's social importance grows with every passing year, and it is thus useful to inform the medical field about the hospital's history and work. The Bichur-Cholim Hospital was established in Kaunas one hundred years ago on what is today Daukšos Street. Initially, the hospital only had 10–15 beds. It later moved to a small building which stood on land owned today by Bichur-Cholim. Over time, the hospital expanded considerably. The main hospital building and the infectious



The Kaunas Jewish Hospital (now No. 5 A. Jakšto Street). 1930s.
Photograph: Juozas Stanišauskas, KAVB

diseases unit were built between 1904 and 1912. Before the Great War, the hospital had 50 beds and treated 600 patients annually. The hospital's budget consisted of city council funds, member dues, etc. The hospital was designated for the treatment of poor Jews from Kaunas city and county. During the war and the periods of foreign occupation, the Bichur-Cholim Hospital was completely shut down. Thanks to the efforts of the Jewish community and the American Joint Distribution Committee, the Bichur-Cholim Hospital was reopened. After the Great War, the hospital had to reorganize, expand its operations, and adapt to the demands of modern medicine. . . . Support units treat patients from the hospital itself, as well as patients from Oze, the Jewish Children's Home, the Jewish Elder Home, Mishmeret-Cholim, and other

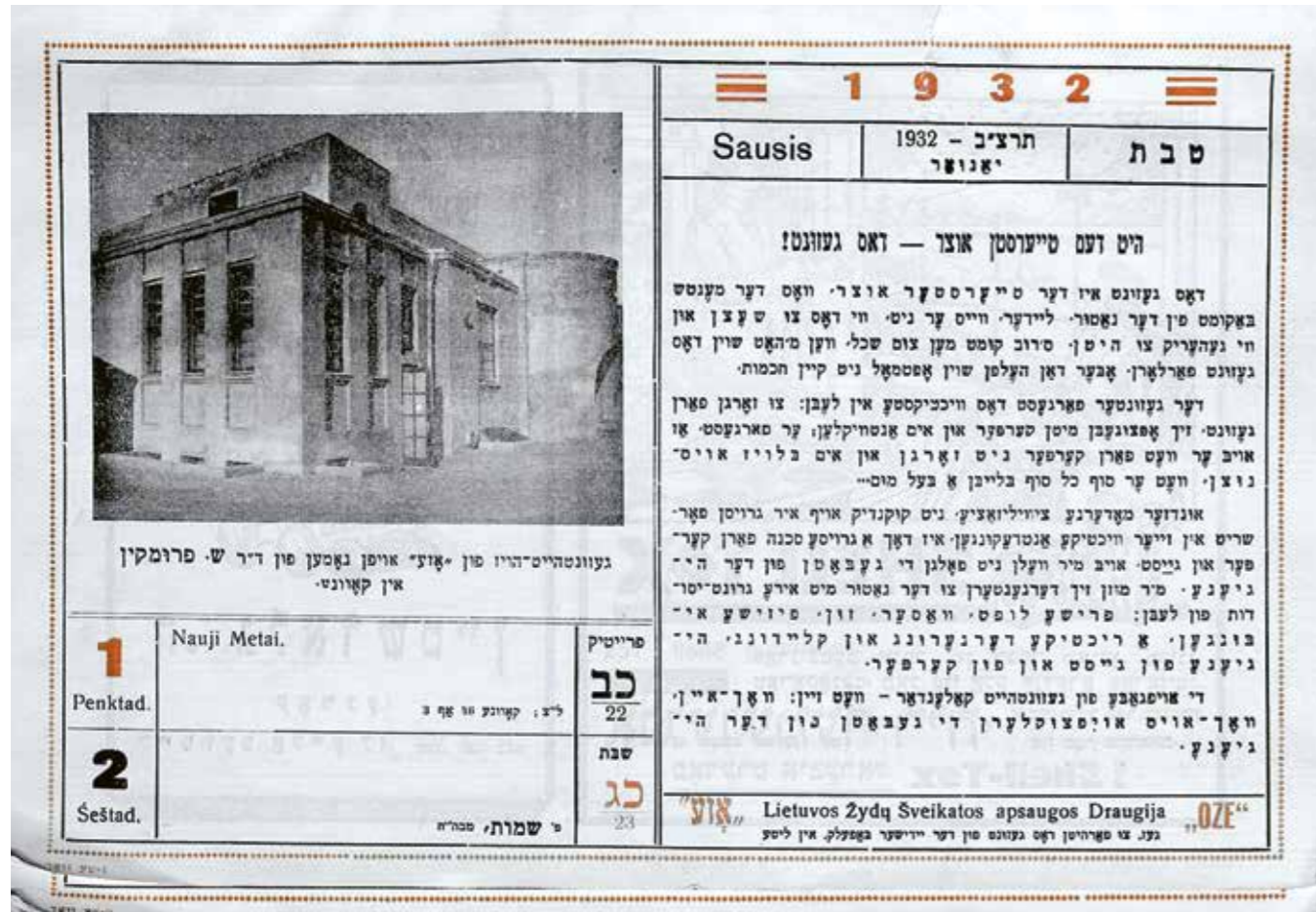


Home of Elkhanan Elkes and private hospital (now No. 8 Keštučio Street). 1934.
Joel Elkes. *Dr. Elkhanan Elkes of the Kovno Ghetto: A Son's Holocaust Memoir*.
Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 1999

medical institutions. The aim of Bichur-Cholim Hospital is to provide free, accessible, and qualified care primarily for poor and less affluent patients. When space is available, the hospital also admits wealthier patients based on a minimum fee (at cost). In addition to its mission to treat patients, the Kaunas Jewish Hospital also performs research and educational functions.

Dr. Benjamin Golach, Chief Physician,
Kaunas Jewish Hospital. *Medicina*, 1931⁷

⁷ Dr. B. Golachas, Kauno Žydų ligoninės vyr. gydytojas. Kauno žydų „Bikur-Cholim“ Ligoninės 5 metų (1926–1930) veikimo apžvalga. *Medicina*, 1931, nr. 6, 418–421.



1932 OZE Health Calendar. Kaunas. 1931. LNMMB Judaica Collection

The director of the Kaunas Jewish Hospital, Isaac Levitan, opened a private women's hospital at No. 19 Miško Street (today No. 27) to "provide gynecological surgery and childbirth care."⁸

The head of the Kaunas Jewish Hospital's Internal Diseases Unit, Elkhanan Elkes, constructed a building at No. 6 Kęstučio Street (today No. 8) in 1930. He rented out the first and third floors and

set up a small private hospital on the second floor, where he also lived with his family. Doctor Elkes was known to be extremely generous to his patients and would also provide treatment free of charge. His reception room was always full of patients who were unable to pay for treatment.⁹

⁸ Arvydas Pakštalis, Brigita Tranavčiūtė, Linas Vitkus. *Respublikinė Kauno ligoninė: 65 metai medicinos istorijos*. Kaunas, 2017, 98.

⁹ Joel Elkes. *Dr. Elkhanan Elkes of the Kovno Ghetto: A Son's Holocaust Memoir*. Brewster: Paraclete Press, 1999, 5.



Covers from the 1938 and 1939 OZE calendars. Kaunas. 1937 and 1938. LNMMB Judaica Collection

OZE – THE JEWISH HEALTH CARE SOCIETY

The *Obshchestvo Okhraneniia Zdorov'ia Evreiskogo Naseleniia* (Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population) was established in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1912. The organization later came to be known by the acronym OZE, short for its Russian name *Obshchestvo Zdravoohkraneniia Evreev* (Jewish Health Care Society).

A Kaunas OZE chapter opened in 1913, founded by prominent Kaunas physicians and other city residents, including Teodor Meyerowitz, Isaiah Frumkin, Isidor Kotsin, Efraim Rabinowicz,

Julijus Michalewski, Philip Mendelsohn, Samuel Iserson, Febus Garfunkel, Abba Lapin, and David Schwartz.¹⁰

A small group of Jewish specialists from different fields (physicians Boris Yoffe, Lazar Finkelstein, Boris Strasburg, lawyer and Constituent Assembly member Ozer Finkelstein, Constituent Assembly member Samuel Landau, and engineer Nikolay Frumkin) gathered in Kaunas in December 1921 to reestablish the OZE

¹⁰ KRVA, f. I-53, ap. 1, b. 226.



OZE Health Centre hall (now No. 1 D. Poškos Street).
1928. Yad Vashem Archives

society. The reconstituted organization's executive board included: Chairman L. Finkelstein, secretary Benjamin Bludz, treasurer Beile Rittenberg, and twelve other members. A membership fee was set at 50 złoty per year. The board opened its offices on Didžioji Totorių (today I. Kanto) Street.

The society's charter, adopted on January 5, 1922, included the following goals: caring for Jewish health and physical improvement, conducting academic research in the field of sanitation statistics, and providing Jews with medical and sanitation support.

The OZE society's range of activities was extremely broad and varied, including preventive care and ambulatory services, inpatient care, dispensary monitoring, training for nurses, emergency medical care, charitable support, etc. An article in a 1923 edition of the journal *Medicina* (Medicine) described the society thus:

"Philanthropy and community treatment have always been well organized among Jews. Now, in particular, new attention is being devoted to the health of infants, women, and students. We recommend our activists to become better acquainted with Jewish institutions, since Lithuanians are lagging behind Jews in this regard."¹¹

OZE printed and disseminated leaflets, brochures, and posters about improving the health of infants, women, and students. It also provided information on preventive care against the growing spread of tuberculosis, trachoma, venereal diseases, and typhoid fever. The society devoted considerable attention to the ambulatory care of school children. In the first year of the society's operations, a Central School Medical Office (directed by

¹¹ Kauno m. Žydų gydymo įstaigos. *Medicina*, 1923, nr. 2, 126.



Student health examination supported by the OZE Society, Kaunas.
1927. Yad Vashem Archives

S. Schwartz-Finkelstein) was established in Kaunas, coordinating the work of fifteen school medical offices in the city, where school children were examined twice a year to assess their health and hygiene and administer vaccinations. Through the society's efforts, schools in Kaunas were provided boiled drinking water and water and towels for hand hygiene.

Children were required to bathe in saunas twice a month. Children were examined at the end of the school year and those found to be poorly fed, weak, or infected with tuberculosis were sent for treatment and rest at OZE sanatoriums and summer camps.

An Adult Ambulatory Center was opened on May 15, 1922 at No. 4 Gardino (now Puodžių) Street, and then moved on November 17 to Maironio Street 17. The center was overseen by the physician B. Bludz. The center also had a house call dispatch office.

A Jewish Children's Hospital and Jewish Children's Home was located at Giedraičių Street 4. The Mishmeret-Cholim Society, providing support to poor Jewish patients, had its office at Palangos Street 1. A Jewish Emergency Medical Aide office operated at A. Mapu Street 2.

A significant event in the civic life of Kaunas was the opening of the Dr. Simon Frumkin Health Center (at what is today D. Poškos Street 1) on March 25, 1928. The main benefactors supporting the construction of this modern health center were the surviving family members of Dr. Frumkin (who died in 1919) in the United States, and the OZE society chapter in Berlin. The Health Center had an Ambulatory Care Unit for adults, a school medical office, a Dental Office, a consultation office for mothers and infants below the age of two, a Hygiene Exhibition, a Gymnastics Hall, showers for school children, and other services.

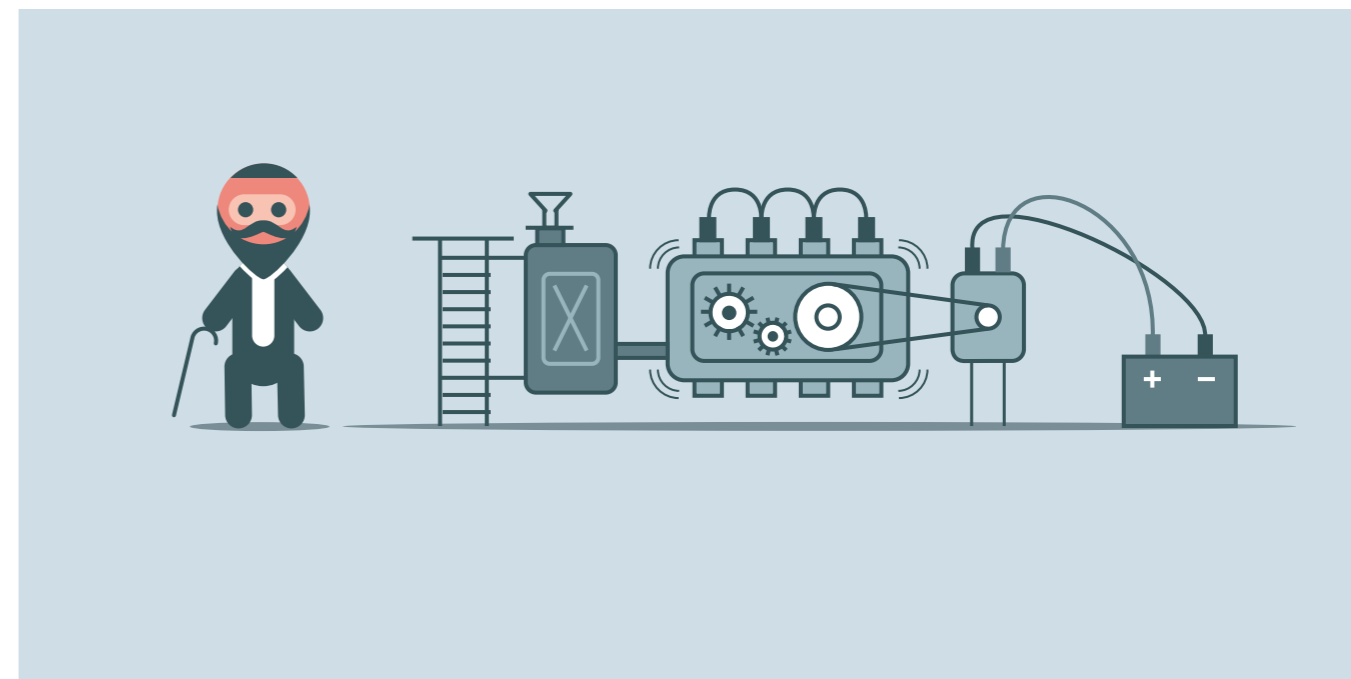
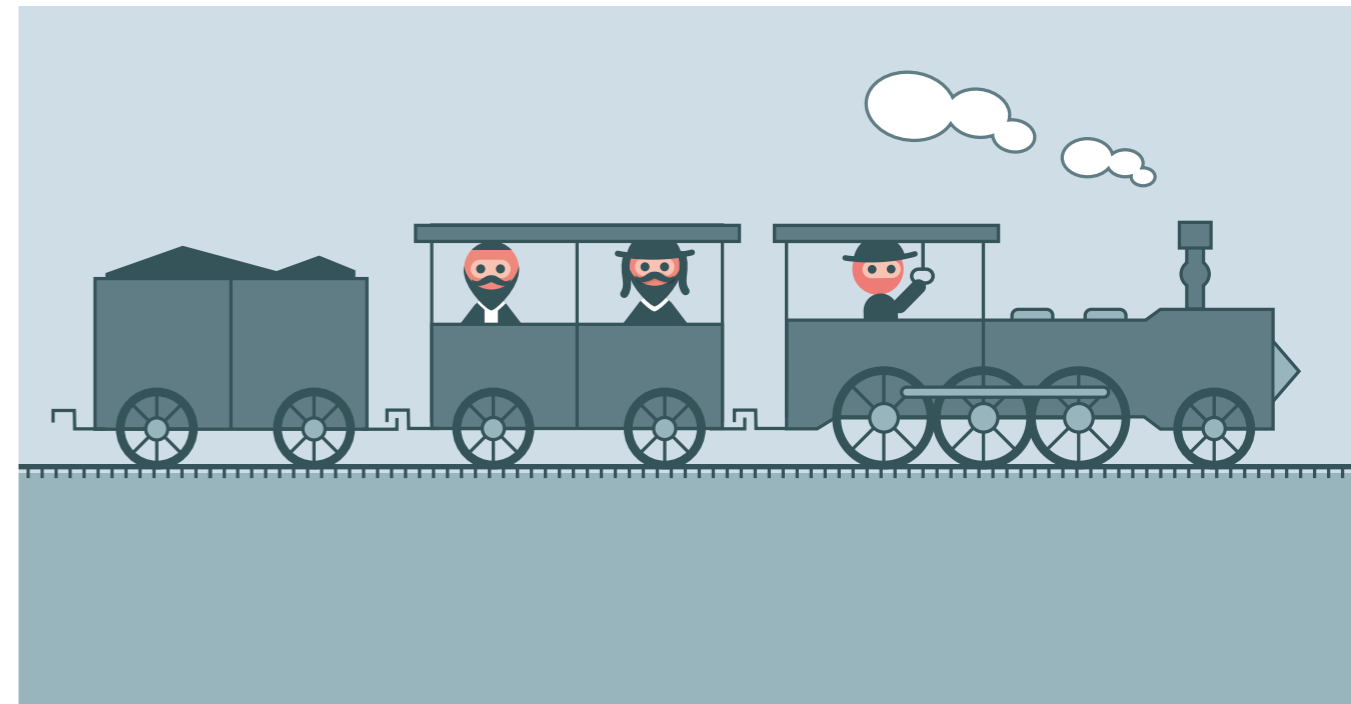


INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS

The image of Jews as merchants and innkeepers is deeply rooted in history. But as industry developed in the 19th century, Jewish activities expanded to include other areas of business. Jews were often the first to introduce various industrial innovations to Lithuania and Kaunas. Jewish businessmen in Lithuania's provisional capital faced competition from the growing Lithuanian business community and they narrowed their focus to the more traditional commercial sector. But Jewish businessmen, whether alone or

in cooperation with Lithuanians, also established industrial enterprises in sectors that were new to Kaunas, including textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, etc. Jews dominated the Kaunas tobacco and cigarette, beer, wood processing, and construction materials industries, and were leading contractors in construction.¹

¹ Kauno žydų bendruomenė. Virtuali paroda.





THE TIMBER BUSINESS

I paid a visit to Kovno, one of the towns in which a large and characteristic Jewish population is to be seen. It is a beautifully situated, straggling town at the confluence of the rivers Niemen and [Neris]. It has a population of 75,000, half of whom are Jews.

At certain seasons of the year a large timber industry is carried on. Rafts are floated down the river from the up country and have to be reconstructed and strengthened when they reach the town. This work is carried on entirely by Jewish labour. It is of an arduous kind, needing muscular strength and endurance, and it involves great exposure. The labour is fairly paid, and the people engaged upon it during four or five months live for the rest of the year on the wages they receive.

William Evans-Gordon²

One of the main exports to Prussia in the latter half of the 19th century was timber. Rafts were floated in great numbers down the Nemunas River through Kaunas to Prussia, with work continuing throughout the navigation season, which would begin as soon as rivers were free from winter ice.³ Cheap raw materials and the needs of a rapidly growing Kaunas spurred the expansion of the timber processing industry.

In 1863, Kaunas merchants I. Kopeliansky and O. Verbliudsky opened a steam-powered sawmill. By the late 19th century, the timber industry was growing rapidly in Kaunas. In 1913, the city already had ten sawmills, the largest owned by A. Soloveichik, employing 100 workers.

³ Vincas Černeckis. Kapitalistinės pramonės formavimasis ir vystymasis Kaune XIX a. antroje pusėje ir XX pradžioje (1861–1913 m.). *Lietuvos TSR aukštųjų mokyklų mokslo darbai. Istorija*, t. 9, 1967, 65.

² W. Evans-Gordon. *The Alien Immigrant*. London, 1903, 112.



Stacks of lumber at the port of Kaunas. 1915. Private collection

Kaunas timber specialists were also highly valued abroad. The wisdom of merchant Joseph Geffen and his honorable approach in business transactions earned him a good reputation among timber merchants in Prussia. Kaunas merchants chose Geffen to represent them in the managing of affairs with the Prussian timber industry.

When Joseph [Geffen] was growing up, his parents lived in a small village. There was no cheder or yeshivah in this community, so Joseph had to walk a distance of eight miles every day to attend cheder. In order to reach his destination, it was necessary for the young boy to go through dense forest and fields – part of the estates of some of the wealthy non-Jews. ... He was very observant and possessed an unusual memory. As he walked through the woods day-after-day, he became acquainted with the trees that grew in that vicinity, estimating their height and diameter and speculating on the purpose for which they could be used.

Louis Geffen⁴

The abundance of timber drove the development of other sectors in Kaunas. In 1873, Rosenblum established a wooden nail factory and around the same year the city saw the opening of P. Schlapobersky's match factory. By the late 19th century, Kaunas also had the M. Wolpert, I. Finkelstein and H. Rabinovich match factories. The Balkan product line made at Wolpert's factory was also exported throughout the Russian Empire, while Finkelstein's Etna products were sold in Vilnius, Grodno, Warsaw, and other governorates.⁵

⁴ Louis Geffen. *Biography of Rabbi Tobias Geffen. Lev Tuviah: On the Life and Work of Rabbi Tobias Geffen*. Ed. Joel Ziff. Newton, MA: Rabbi Tobias Geffen Memorial Fund, 1988, 20–21.

⁵ Vincas Černeckis. Kapitalistinės pramonės formavimasis, 69.



THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

By the latter half of the 19th century, Kaunas had a thriving tobacco industry. In the 1880s, the city had six tobacco factories, the largest of which were owned by Ginsburg, Goldberg, and Natanson, providing jobs for 540 Kaunas workers.⁶ After declining somewhat at the very end of the 19th century due to monopoly policies imposed in the Russian Empire, the tobacco industry dwindled even further prior to World War One. Only two tobacco and cigarette factories remained operational, owned by Rocha Aronovski and Abba Weinstein, but these were also soon forced to cease production and their equipment was destroyed.

It's easy to start a business after inheriting wealth from one's parents or when one has proper training. The only thing Chaim Ziv got from his parents was a love for work. As for training – that he was able to

receive. Not at a university or any institute abroad, but through practical experience, since he had worked nearly every type of job in the tobacco industry. When he was young, he began his career as a servant at a small Kaunas tobacco factory – so small, in fact, that he sometimes also had to work as a laborer there. The smell of tobacco essentially followed him from the very start of his independent life and became second nature to him. He was in his true element. Hardworking and tough, as a factory clerk Chaim Ziv constantly improved his knowledge of the tobacco business, thoroughly familiarizing himself with the production process and the state of its workers. Before the war, he already owned a tobacco product bulk warehouse, where he also learned the role that merchants played in the tobacco sector.

Ephraim Olitski⁷

⁷ Efraimas Olickis. Ab imo pektore (Iš visos širdies). *Sausasis svaigulys* (Ch. Zivo įpėd. Tabako ir papirosų fabriko 20 m. sukakties proga), Kaunas, 1939, 3.

⁶ Vincas Černeckis. Kapitalistinės pramonės formavimasis, 70.



The pavilion of the Salomon Brothers Tobacco and Papirosai Factory at the 7th Lithuanian Agriculture and Industry Fair in Kaunas. 28 June–3 July 1928. Photograph: Janina Tallat-Kelpšienė, LCVA

The tobacco industry began to recover in Kaunas in 1918, after the opening of factories by Chaim Ziv and the Salomon brothers. A real boom in tobacco and cigarette production was evident in Kaunas by the 1920s, with new factories established by D. Feinberg, M. Tabachnik as well as V. Baumgartel's Kontinental factory, Asimakis' tobacco and cigarette factory, and others. All of these producers continued operations until 1940, after which they were nationalized during the first Soviet occupation.⁸

The founder of the Salomon Brothers factory, Israel Salomon, studied at a rabbinical seminary but later began working in industry... After the establishment of the Lithuanian state, Salomon was among our first pioneers in the tobacco industry and quickly expanded his factory in Kaunas to become of the sector's most important enterprises in

⁸ Alvydas Surblys. *Tabako pramonė Kaune 1918–1940 m.* <http://knyga.kvb.lt/>.

the country. Israel Salomon never refuses to support charitable work and has often made large donations... Israel Salomon represents an older generation of Jews, who combined a specific Jewish education with European studies into one harmonious whole.

Israel Salomon. *Apžvalga*, 1936⁹

⁹ Izraelis Saliamonas. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. rugpjūčio 23 d., 9.

THE CONFECTIONARY INDUSTRY

The oldest producer of sweets and candies in Kaunas, the Ashkinazi chocolate and sweets factory, was established in 1888. The factory belonged to J. and A. Ashkinazi and M. Antzel. In 1931, the factory's production received accolades at an international exhibition in Paris.

Our industry is thriving. The Ashkinazi Kaunas Chocolate and Cocoa Factory Company won a gold medal and the grand prize for its Kodimo cocoa and chocolate at an international exhibition in Paris. Kodimo cocoa and chocolate has become a recognized global brand.

Our Industry Is Thriving. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1931¹⁰

The Tilka company received equally important recognition:

The Tilka company was established on May 20, 1921, founded by K. J. Tilmans, P. Medem, S. Kagan, and B. Kagan. The name Tilka was created taking one syllable from two of the founders' surnames – Tilmans and Kagan – and the initial investment was five million zloty. That capital has now reached 10 million. . . . The company opened a sweets factory in Aleksotas in May 1921, but barely one year later it moved to Šančiai. The shop in Šančiai now produces the same chocolate that the Kagans used to make before the war. Their chocolate easily competes with German chocolates on the world market and Tilka receives numerous orders from abroad.

Kaunas Chronicle. *Lietuva*, 1922¹¹

The broad assortment of sweets sold by the Tilka and Ashkenazi confectionary and chocolate companies were especially popular in Kaunas. Ashkenazi also owned the Kodimo brand.

The Tilka and Kodimo sweets and chocolate shops were on our way [home]. My mother preferred Tilka. There, she'd buy chocolate shards for me and Kazys – pieces that were no longer suitable for packaging or export abroad but were just as tasty and came in all sorts of varieties. And there, behind the glass, there were mounds of all kinds of chocolates that you could buy by weight. Along the wall there were tall glass jars full of different coffee beans that they would grind up for you on the spot. The café smelled not only of chocolate, rum, and



The Tilka candy and chocolate factory pavilion at the 7th Lithuanian Agriculture and Industry Fair in Kaunas. 28 June–3 July 1928. Photograph: Janina Tallat-Kelpšienė, LCVA

mint, but also the best coffee in the city. You could also buy all sorts of beautifully wrapped sweets we called "landrinkas". . . . On our way home, we'd stop in at Markusėlis, too, where you could buy especially delicious buns and almond biscuits.

Rita A. Vileišytė-Bagdonienė¹²

¹² Rita A. Vileišytė-Bagdonienė. *Tolimi vaizdai: Signataro dukters atsiminimai*. Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2008, 40–41.

¹⁰ Mūsų industrija tarpsta. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1931 m. sausio 29 d., 6.

¹¹ Kauno kronika. *Lietuva*, 1922 m. tiepos 27 d., 5.

LIGHT INDUSTRY

I began studying tailoring in Paris in 1903. I chose to specialize in various cutting methods and systems. After graduating, I returned to settle in Kaunas, but every year I'd visit Paris, London, etc., where I continued to improve my knowledge of the field. After studying the good and bad aspects of all the serious tailoring methods, I developed my own improved system after many years of work. The system was later presented at an exhibition in Paris, where it received the honorary Exposition internationale Paris Professeur de Coupe cross. After that I set up the Tailoring School in Kaunas, where I taught tailoring based on my system all the way up to the start of the Great War, visiting the larger cities of Europe on my holidays and always trying to perfect my own system.

Volf Yalov¹³

Sewing courses were very popular in interwar Kaunas. Organizers of the classes attended sewing courses abroad and continued to expand their skills there. L. Rosenfeld, a millinery teacher at the Higher School for Women's Works of Art, had completed millinery courses in Berlin and Paris. Chaja Yalov, who led the corset sewing courses, had attended professional corset sewing classes in Paris.¹⁴ In Kaunas, Yalov taught sewing courses at a girls' trade school run by the Lithuanian Catholic Women's Society for Orphans, which trained an average of 15 to 30 students annually.

A large number of tailors and dressmakers offered their services in Kaunas. This was how J. Shapiro invited customers to his women's clothing sewing shop:

*A certified tailor, Shapiro has been working in his field for over 34 years. He has a large clientele and is well-respected in Kaunas. Because of his connections with the best salons in Paris, he can fulfill orders according to the latest fashions. Come see for yourselves.*¹⁵

Although he was raised in a tailor's family in Vilijampolė, Moses Posviansky did not continue working in his father's trade. After settling in Kaunas, however, he and Hirsh Klis founded the Liteks textile factory in 1927.

¹³ V. Jalovas. *Siuvėjo draugas. Pirmoji dalis*, Kaunas, 1930, 3.

¹⁴ Lija Janauskienė. *Siuvimo amato mokymas: kursai ir amatų mokyklos Kaune 1926–1940 m. Kauno istorijos metraštis*, t. 8, Kaunas, 2007, 316.

¹⁵ Reklama. *Žvilgsniai*, 1933, nr. 1, 35.



An advertisement for corsets sold at the Sara salon. *Žvilgsniai*, 1934 m., Nr. 2

We used to waste a lot of money on textiles purchased abroad. Taking note of this, the more astute industrialists in our country began to open textile factories. In 1927, the Liteks company established its own textile factory in Kaunas and began to produce materials for the domestic market that were just as good as those made abroad. . . . Today, the Liteks company's textile factory uses the most modern methods to produce various kinds of textiles for men's and women's coats and suits, material for uniforms, black and white tulle, and the highest quality black touch crepe.

A Visit to the Liteks Company Textiles Factory. *Lietuvos Aidas*, 1936¹⁶

Factories producing other kinds of textile products also opened in Kaunas in the interwar years. Leib Kamenetzky and Leib, Abraham and Judah Aronofsky opened the Cotton hosiery factory on A. Juozapavičiaus Prospektas in Šančiai in 1930.

This industry is still fairly new, since hosiery had been imported to Lithuania from abroad before 1926. But those who visited the Agricultural Exhibition in Kaunas in 1930 could see the rapid growth of this industry! There was even talk that, if anyone still demands

¹⁶ Akc. B-vės „Litex“ audinių fabriką aplankius. *Lietuvos Aidas*, 1936 m. birželio 27 d., 6.



Advertisements by the Cotton company. *Lietuvos ūkininkas*, 1939, No. 23; *Iliustruotas pasaulis*, 1937, No. 47

foreign-made stockings, they probably only do so out of ignorance, not knowing that such high-quality products are already being made by local factories. . . . So-called Cotton stockings have become widely known and until now have been considered the best foreign-made stockings. The name "Cotton" refers to a certain type of knitting (long-stitch crocheting); the name is also used for modern knitting machines. It turns out we are not so far behind foreign standards. Cotton stockings have recently begun to be produced here as well.

The Cotton Company. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1932¹⁷

My father, Vulf, was the head engineer at the Cotton hosiery factory. I was practically raised on those stockings. My friend Regina's father drove a truck loaded with boxes of stockings. He'd put us in

the back on those boxes and we'd deliver the stockings together all over Kaunas. There were little windows at the back of the truck and we'd look through them at the city streets – which is how images of Kaunas became etched into my memory in my childhood.

From an interview with Fruma Kučinskienė, 2017¹⁸

Two brothers, Jakob and Osher Ulyamperl, opened a knitwear shop in Vilijampolė in 1928 which they later expanded into the Ulyamperl Brothers & Co. corporation. In the 1930s, the company's brand was Silva. Advertisements from the period invited consumers to "Ask only for the best Silva linens."

18 Atminties biuras: F. Kučinskienė. *Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis*, 2017. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinėmis-kauno-bendruomenėmis/atminties-biuras-f-kučinskienė/>



Advertising by Broliai Uliamperliai & Co. Jewish Children's Home calendar for 1939–1940. Kaunas, 1939



A display stand by the G. L. Falkovsky shoe factory at the 7th Lithuanian Agriculture and Industry Fair in Kaunas. 28 June–3 July 1928. Photograph: Janina Tallat-Kelpšienė, LCVA

The Hirsh Leib Falkovsky footwear factory, established in the 19th century, called itself "Lithuania's First Footwear Factory".¹⁹ The company, located at No. 38 Kęstučio Street (now designated as No. 60, including a plot of land in the rear) produced men's and women's shoes, boots, sandals, slippers, as well as footwear for children, sports, and the beach. Footwear was also produced in Kaunas by the Era company, operated by Israel Kapulsky and Abraham Vides from 1926 until 1933. Shaya and Mordchel Gofthel's Lithuania footwear factory (later renamed Lituanica) began production in 1934.²⁰

A shortage in Lithuanian-made rubber footwear was alleviated in 1933 after the opening of the Inkaras galoshes and rubber

products factory, founded by Maxim Abramovich, Samuel Bergman, Aharon Makovsky and two Latvian citizens. Petras Karvelis, an ethnic Lithuanian, later joined the firm as a partner.²¹

The factory promised customers that, by buying its products, "Children won't get the flu, young people won't catch colds, and seniors won't suffer from rheumatism on even the dampest autumn or coldest winter days if they wear comfortable, warm, durable, and beautiful footwear – galoshes and boots."²²

Another boot and galoshes factory, Guma, began operations in 1938, founded by Feinberg, Perlstein, Gut, Goldberg, and Kaplan.²³

19 Alvydas Surblys. *Laikinosios sostinės avalynės gamintojai: ištakos ir aktualijos. Kauno diena, priedas Santaka*, 2019 m. rugpjūčio 23 d., 6–7.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Reklama. *Moteris*, 1935, nr. 1.

23 Leido statyti antrą kaliošų fabriką. *Darbas*, 1937 m. birželio 8, 4.

THE SOAP AND PERFUMERY INDUSTRY

The soap industry began to develop in Kaunas in the latter half of the 19th century, with soap factories run by S. Vislitzky and Z. Chvoles.

Israel Rokeach opened a small perfumery and soap factory in Kaunas in 1870.

[In Kovno] he won the friendship of the finest Jewish families and was held in high esteem by the Kovner gaon, Reb. Isaac Elkhanan. In Kovno, he devised his first two inventions: the manufacture of kosher soap and a method for imprinting the word "kosher" to penetrate through each cake of soap.²⁴

In 1882, Rabbi E. Spektor issued a certificate affirming that the factory adhered to kosher production standards. Rokeach left for America in 1890, where he re-established his kosher soap factory. The small soap store gradually grew into a large company, known throughout the world by the name I. Rokeach and Sons. The Rokeach brand was acquired by The Manischewitz Company to commemorate the 1870 founding date and continues to be used by the corporation today. The company's history began in 1888 in the United States, in the city of Cincinnati, where Rabbi Dov Ber Manischewitz, born in Salantai, Lithuania, first opened a matzah bakery.²⁵

The Vislitzky and Chvoles Marsel soap factories continued operating after World War One. They soon encountered competition from a rush of newly opened soap and perfumery companies. The Berar & Co. soap and perfumery factory began business in 1921, proclaiming itself to be "the first large company of its kind in Lithuania."²⁶ This message likely stemmed from the fact that the "company's founder and owner, Mr. M. Berman, had a similar company in St. Petersburg, from which he brought all his experience to his newly established work."²⁷ Berar & Co. produced toilet and laundry soap as well as colognes and other perfumes.

The Florance factory opened in 1923, owned by M. Potruch and Geilsberg, an engineer. The company produced soap, powders,



The stand of the Berar & Co. soap and perfume factory at the 7th Lithuanian Agriculture and Industry Fair in Kaunas. 28 June–3 July 1928. Photograph: Janina Tallat-Kelpšienė, LCVA

colognes, and perfumes. Florance eventually became a leader in the Kaunas cosmetics and perfumery industry.²⁸ The factory was nationalized by the Soviet government in 1940.

²⁸ A. Surblys, A. Zakaravičiūtė, E. Rudminaitė. Kur tarpukariu galėjai nusipirkti Max Factor kosmetikos? Higienos prekių ir kosmetikos bei parfumerijos įmonių tarpukario Kaune apžvalga, 2017. <https://knyga.kvb.lt/lt/parodos/temines-leidiniu-parodos/item/101-kur-tarpukariu-galejai-nusipirkti-max-factor-kosmetikos-higienos-prekiu-ir-kosmetikos-bei-parfumerijos-imoniu-tarpukario-kaune-apzvalga>

²⁴ Samuel P. Abelow. *History of Brooklyn Jewry*. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1937, 289.

²⁵ Manischewitz. *Our story*. <https://manischewitz.com/our-story/>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ J. Etingerys, M. Liutermoza. *Lietuvos pramonė*. Kaunas, 1923, 100.

Seniausioji
Muilo fabrika
Lietuvoje
Š. Vislitzkis
Kaunas, Jonavos g. 36
Telef. 1005
apdovanojama Paryžiaus
tarptautinėj mugėj
1928 metais
„GRAND PRIX“
IR **AUKSO MEDALIŲ**
už gerą savo
išdirbinių kokybę.

An ad for the Vislitzky soap factory. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1 December 1928.

Reikalaukite muilo su paukščiu

Turime garbės pranešti mūsų gerb. klientūrai ir vartotojams, kad už mūsų pasižymėjusį **MARSEL-MUILO** mes apdovanojami **Paryžiaus tarptautinėj mugėj aukso medaliu.**

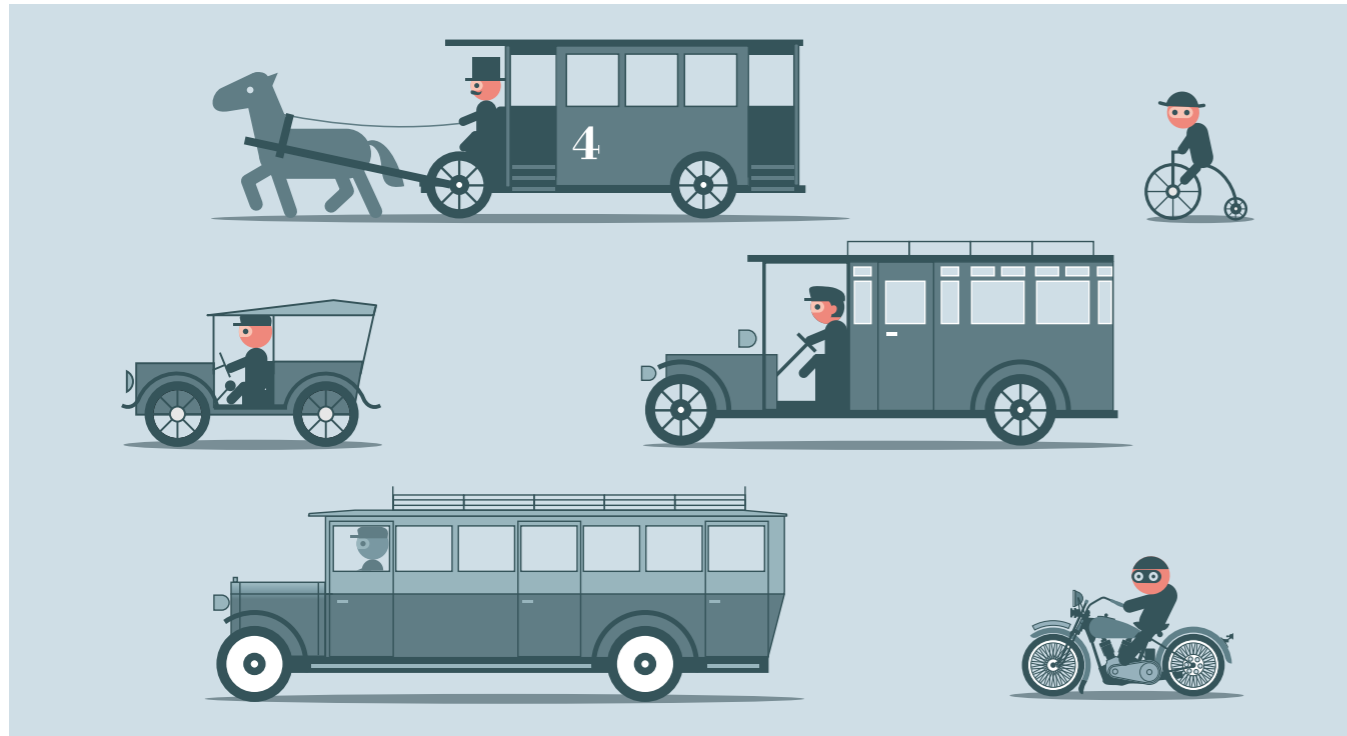
Su pagarba
Z. Chvoles
Muilo fabrikas „MARSEL“
Kaunas, Daukšos g-vė 24
Telef. 16-77, 25-23.

Reikalaukite muilo su paukščiu

An ad for Zalman Chvoles' Marsel soap factory. *Lietuvos aidas*, 23 November 1928.

עקאנאמיע איז די גאראנטיע
צו רייכקייט!
נאך פילע פראוון האבן מיר ארויסגעקאן אין פארקויף
בדומען אדעקאלאן פון ליטווישע ליליען-בלומען
אונטערן נאמען
LILAS DE LITHUANIE
FLORANCE—Kaunas
פאדערט אין אלע פארומערן געשעפטן - אין איר העט זיך איבערצייגן
אז די פארפוס און אדעקאלאן פון אונטערע ליטווישע הייען שטייען
לויט זייער ריח און קוואליטעט העכער ווי די אויסגענישע און לויטן
פריין באדייטנד ציטיגער.
FLORANCE—Kaunas

An ad for the Florance cosmetics and perfume factory. *Nais (Naujienos)*, 1926, No. 6



BUSES

In the late 19th century, visitors to Kaunas were not at all impressed by the state of transportation in the city. Johan Gerard Onken, a Baptist minister who traveled through Kaunas together with a pastor from Klaipėda on their way to St. Petersburg in 1864 observed: "On our arrival at Kowno we were surrounded by a swarm of dirty Jews in tattered garments, offering to carry us in their wretched droskies to the railway station."²⁹ After prolonged haggling, the missionary and pastor finally departed for the train station – but in two carriages, given the extremely small size of the vehicles.

But by 1909 the first buses began driving through the streets of Kaunas. That same year, the merchant Gershon Levin wrote to the Kaunas city government asking for a permit to transport passengers in two Gaggenau automobiles. A 24-horsepower Kai-sebrik automobile with eleven first class seats was to run from

Paradnaya (City Hall) Square to the train station, stopping along the way at a boy's school, the district court, the governorate treasury office, the state bank, the Sobor church, and the Tillmanns Brothers factory. The trip from City Hall Square to the Sobor Church or from the Sobor to the train station cost 8 kopeks, and the fare for the entire route was set at 15 kopeks.³⁰

The Kaunas City Council certified Levinas' cars as suitable and allowed them to be driven in the city in the winter between eight o'clock in the morning to eight in the evening, and in summer from eight in the morning until ten at night. The cars had to be properly illuminated, all passenger stops were to be properly designated, drivers had to be experienced,³¹ and the speed of the

³⁰ 1909 m. lapkričio 11 d. Geršono Levino prašymas. KAA, f. I-61, ap. 3, b. 602, l. 23, 24.

³¹ 1909 m. lapkričio 12 d. Kauno miesto tarybos protokolas nr. 139. KAA, f. I-61, ap. 1, b. 1378, l. 265.

²⁹ Mr. Oncken's visit to St. Petersburg. *The Missionary Magazine*, 178.



Vilnius Street, Kaunas. 1926. *Naujas žodis*, 1929, No.17

vehicles within the city limits could not exceed 15 versts (approximately 16 kilometers – Ed.) per hour. The press at the time reported on the changes taking place in the city:

Two automobiles have recently begun perambulating through Kaunas: one between the train station and public plaza, and the other between the station and Green Hill. So many people have begun riding them on holidays that many are unable to find an empty seat.

News. Kaunas. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1909³²

In 1909, Kaunas resident J. Frenkel received permission to transport passengers by automobile from Kaunas to Ukmergė. His car was to make two trips per day: at 5 o'clock in the morning and at 7 o'clock in the evening. Frenkel planned to complete the journey from Kaunas to Ukmergė (70 versts or approximately 75 kilometers – Ed.) in three hours.³³

³² Žinios. Kaunas. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1909 m. lapkričio 21 d., nr. 49, 3.

³³ Lietuvos kronika. Kaunas. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1909 m. rugsėjo 23 d., nr. 32, 3.

The same route was soon serviced by cars driven by Kaunas residents Frilander, Kaufmann, and Yoselevich. A first-class ticket cost 2 and $\frac{3}{4}$ kopeks per verst, and a second-class ticket – 2 and $\frac{1}{4}$ kopeks per verst. Travel baggage could be included for an additional $\frac{1}{4}$ kopeks per verst.³⁴

Regular service was impeded by weather conditions and blizzards often led to interruptions in travel outside the city.³⁵

Bus service in Kaunas was suspended due to the poor state of city roads and was only renewed in the 1920s. American-made Studebaker buses were used to transport passengers by Juozapas Bielogurskis' company Bella and by Solomon Skudsi, while Simon Frenkel and Joseph Schwartz used Chevrolet, General Motors, and other makes of buses.³⁶

³⁴ Automobiliai. *Viltis*, 1909 m. spalio 4 d., nr. 115, 3.

³⁵ Pūgos. *Viltis*, 1909 m. lapkričio 13 d., nr. 132, 4.

³⁶ Brigita Tranavičiūtė, Arvydas Pakštalis. *80 metų kelyje: UAB „Kautra“ ir UAB „Kauno autobusai“*. Kaunas, 2014, 51–61.



The Lithuanian Bank of Commerce in Kaunas, at the corner of Laisvės Alėja and Maironio Street. 1930s. Jonas Palys Collection

BANKS

Tradesmen, like all other businessmen, need credit. Except for the Jews, tradesmen don't have such credit. And they don't have it because tradesmen need small loans, based more on personal trust than on some guarantee of assets. Naturally, banks aren't interested in such loans. . . . This is where our obligation as a society arises, to come to the aid of tradesmen. In this regard, Lithuania's Jewish community has provided an example worth following. Jewish intellectuals don't shun tradesmen. They help them organize and find sources of credit. Jewish doctors, lawyers, and other professionals gladly help with low fees for organized Jewish tradesmen. Lithuanian society should follow the example of the Jewish community.

Kazys Sruoga, How the City Can Help Villages.
Mūsų kraštas, 1936³⁷

³⁷ Kazys Sruoga. Kuo miestas gali padėti kaimui? *Mūsų kraštas*, 1935 m. spalio 25 d., nr. 43.

After the restoration of Lithuanian statehood, citizens of all ethnic groups took an interest in the development of the country's industry and commerce. The Lithuanian Bank of Commerce was established in Kaunas in 1920 with the aim of providing financing for Lithuanian commercial and industrial ventures. The bank's founders included prominent interwar business and community leaders, such as Richard Tillmanns, Leonty Soloveichik, Ozer Finkelstein, Povilas Olšauskas, Michael Soloveichik, and Pavel Medem.³⁸ Indeed, Lithuanians, Germans, and Jews joined together for a common goal. The bank's director was Boris Bernstein. On June 14, 1941, Bernstein and his family were deported to the Altai region in the Soviet Far East.³⁹

³⁸ Lietuvos Komercijos Banko įstatai. *Laikinosios Vyriausybės žinios*, 1920 m., nr. 31, 5.

³⁹ Vladas Terleckas, Vilius Kavaliauskas. Lietuvos bankų vadovai. *Pažadėtoji žemė Lietuva: Lietuvos žydai kuriant valstybę 1918–1940 m.* Ed. V. Kavaliauskas. Vilnius, 2013, 76.



The Jewish Central Bank in Kaunas (now No. 106 Laisvės Alėja). 1920s–1930s. Photograph: Vincas Uždavinyš, ŠAM

That same year, the Central Lithuanian Jewish Bank to Support Cooperation in Lithuania (known simply as the Central Jewish Bank) was established in Kaunas, dedicated to “support all types of cooperation among Lithuania's Jews, and to finance small company credit, consumption, provision of machinery, production, small loans, and raw materials.”⁴⁰

In the 1930s, the board of the Central Jewish Bank asserted that:

Our bank's foundations are absolutely solid and strong, our clients are pleased with our work, we have the complete trust of the State Bank and I am convinced that the Central Jewish Bank will continue to thrive for the benefit of Lithuania's Jews. The Central Bank has support both in Kaunas and in those locations where it

⁴⁰ Centralinio Lietuvos Žydų Banko Kooperacijai remti įstatai. *Laikinosios Vyriausybės žinios*, 1920, nr. 25, 1.

*has established branches, and I can assure you that the board, the council, and all bank employees are making every effort to serve the interests of our clients.*⁴¹

After its founding, the bank's directors included Grigory Vulf, Alexander Ziskind Macht, Benjamin Brudny, and Felix Rabinovich.⁴²

⁴¹ Visuotinis metinis Centralinio žydų banko akcininkų susirinkimas. *Apžvalga*, 1936 m. gegužės 17 d.

⁴² Vladas Terleckas, Vilius Kavaliauskas. Lietuvos bankų vadovai, 77–79.



Karadi radio receivers: Tautofonas (1935–1937) and the B2D Liaudies imtuvas (People's Receiver) (c. 1937). Zenonas Langaitis Collection

RADIO RECEIVERS AND TELEVISION SETS

In 1935, Isaak Kaplan registered the brand name Karadi (a contraction of his surname and the word “radio”) for “radio devices, their parts, and different types of machines.”⁴³ Kaplan’s firm opened an office at No. 36 Kęstučio Street.

Karadi is the only factory in Lithuania producing its own radio machinery. It makes all sorts of receivers, from the inexpensive and economical single-tube device to the large seven-tube receiver, in which both the company and our country’s industry can take pride. The only surprising thing may be how quickly Karadi has caught up to foreign standards. Karadi receivers are equally as good as foreign devices. The receiver’s tone is clear and resonant, with easy servicing, and everyone is surprised by the number of receivable stations. Indeed, Karadi receivers have begun to spread all across Lithuania. The factory is now introducing its “people’s receivers” to the market, which are sure to conquer our countryside. These are inexpensive and affordable receivers, specially adapted for local conditions. . . .

Karadi’s operations are important for the country’s economy, because local radio production will prevent the huge sums flowing

out of Lithuania to pay for foreign radio machines. In addition, such business improves the technical knowledge of our industry, trains specialists, and prepares the way for other branches of high-quality technical production. The Karadi company was awarded a gold medal for its product line presented at the 1936 exhibition. This branch of industry shows that we must and, indeed, already can have faith in our own production.

Lithuanian Radio Receivers Are Just as Good as Foreign Ones.
Diena, 1936⁴⁴

In 1935, Hirsh Kadushin published a small book entitled *Televizija: judamųjų vaizdų perdavimas radio pagalba* (Television: Using Radios to Transmit Moving Images). In the book, Kadushin wrote:

Today, we have all types and systems of television devices. These devices are divided into mechanical and electronic. The most important parts of mechanical devices are rotatable: motors, washers,

⁴⁴ Lietuviški radio imtuvai neblogesni už užsienio. *Diena*, 1936 m. liepos 12 d., 6.

⁴³ LCVA, f. 388, ap. 6, b. 846.



Hirsh Kadushin. *Televizija: judamųjų vaizdų perdavimas radio pagalba*. Kaunas, 1935. KMM

*small mirrors, etc. But in electronic devices, the most important role is played not by rotating parts, but electrons. These devices are very complicated and are too difficult to make for simple amateur radio enthusiasts. Here, we will provide a description how one can easily assemble a mechanical, mirror-screw television receiver. This type of receiver will cost approximately 150 litas, at the most, to construct.*⁴⁵

Hirsh Kadushin was a teacher of mathematics, science, and electronics at the Hebrew Gymnasium. Although he was never

able to graduate from the Vytautas Magnus University Technical Faculty’s Electrical Engineering Department “due to a lack of funds,”⁴⁶ even without a degree Kadushin continued to study the subtleties of technical science. Kadushin opened a radio repair laboratory on Laisvės Alėja and made custom-built cameras in his spare time. Today, Kadushin is better known around the world as George Kadish, the photographer of the Kaunas ghetto. During the Second World War, Kadushin built a camera which he used to capture images of ghetto life, shooting through a hole in his coat.

⁴⁵ G. Kadušinas. *Televizija: judamųjų vaizdų perdavimas radio pagalba*. Kaunas, 1935.

⁴⁶ LCVA, f. 631, ap. 7, b. 8059.



THE BUILDERS OF KAUNAS

After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, construction work rapidly expanded in the country's provisional capital. Kaunas Jews – architects, engineers, and construction contractors – actively participated in constructing the city's most important buildings: the Central Post Office, the Officers' Club, the Kaunas Sports Arena, and other buildings that came to shape the unique, modernist face of the city in the interwar years.

After restoring independence and living through the worst trials of the war, Lithuania obviously could not yet take pride in any of its construction. It was lacking all of the most essential buildings. And it would not be able to construct them quickly, since the country also lacked funds. . . . But, with time, as in all things, the first obstacles in this sector were also overcome and today the country has many examples of all sorts of construction. And, in many cases, we also have something to show off to others. . . . Of the many firms and individuals, objective data and all other indicators show that much was contributed over these two decades in construction by the Ilgovsky

Brothers' construction firm and, lately, by just Gedalyahu Ilgovsky alone. Theirs is a firm closely linked to the construction of Lithuania as a whole from the very moment of recovering independence and has become synonymous with building the country. The firm has constructed the largest and most beautiful buildings in Lithuania. It has built the most beautiful Lithuanian primary schools, high schools, institutes, government and agency buildings, factories, and buildings owned by private individuals. The Ilgovsky brothers have built the Dr. Vincas Kudirka School in Kaunas, the Vytautas Magnus University Eye Clinic, the Veterinary Institute, the Faculty of Medicine building, the firefighters' hall, the Chamber of Agriculture, the Vytautas the Great Museum, and other buildings in Kaunas and around Lithuania.

A Firm Making a Significant Contribution to the Progress of Construction Around the Country. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1938⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Firma, kuri labai daug prisidėjo prie krašto statybinės pažangos. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1938 m. vasario 15 d., 48.

twenty years, we've actually built many wonderful, very essential buildings. . . . Only a shared, united effort could have achieved so much in all sectors. And speaking of our construction, we absolutely must mention the most important builders who devoted their skills and energy to complete the work entrusted to them. We take note of the famous builder M. Grodzensky, who has constructed many beautiful government buildings in Kaunas. He built the wonderful post office, the telephone exchange, the Officers' Club, and many other public and private buildings. . . . Grodzensky never had any misunderstandings in his construction projects, and all of his buildings are wonderful landmarks. Today, images of many of his projects are used for postcards since they are true ornaments of architecture.

Our Beautiful Construction.
Lietuvos aidas, 1938⁴⁸

Engineer Leonas Ritas has been called the most active designer of prestigious residential housing – someone who was able to “creatively assess the needs of his clients and the aesthetic possibilities of various different stylistic trends.”⁴⁹ Some of the most important buildings designed by Ritas still stand today in the center of Kaunas: at Kęstučio Street 66, S. Daukanto Street 14 and 77, and V. Putvinskio Street 62, among others. In 1934, Ritas designed the instructional wing of the Vilijampolė Yeshiva (present-day Panerių Street 51).

Engineer Anatoly Rosenblum was perhaps Lithuania's best-known pioneer of engineering innovation and an expert in working with concrete and steel construction. Rosenblum's proposed solutions contributed to the completion of the Central Post Office, the Vytautas Magnus University Faculty of Medicine, the Kaunas Regional Municipal Building, the Officers' Club, and the Ministry of Defense Armaments Board Research Laboratory.⁵⁰ Rosenblum designed the Kaunas Sports Arena, built to host the 1939 European Basketball Championship. On the eve of the event, the Secretary-General of the International Basketball Federation, Renato William Jones, called the new venue “the best basketball arena in Europe.”⁵¹

In the 1920s, two engineers – Grigory Mazel and Mikas Grodzensky – became actively involved in the work of construction specialists in Kaunas. Their 1924 design for the Central Jewish Bank building (located today at Laisvės Alėja 76) was among the first modern buildings to include art deco elements. In 1926, Mazel designed the M. Schwabe High School building (at No. 11 Karaliaus Mindaugo Prospektas today) and, that same year, adapted a design for the OZE Society building (at D. Poškos Street 1 today). In 1929, Grodzensky designed one of the most famous homes in Kaunas, belonging to Dr. Elkhanaan Elkes, which included a private hospital (today designated as No. 8 Kęstučio Street). The building also housed the Finnish and Hungarian consulates and a Montessori school. During the Soviet period, it housed the city's Tuberculosis Clinic. Grodzensky also contributed to the construction of other important buildings in Kaunas.

We're not the only ones who are impressed by our new construction – many visitors and foreigners are as well. And over the first

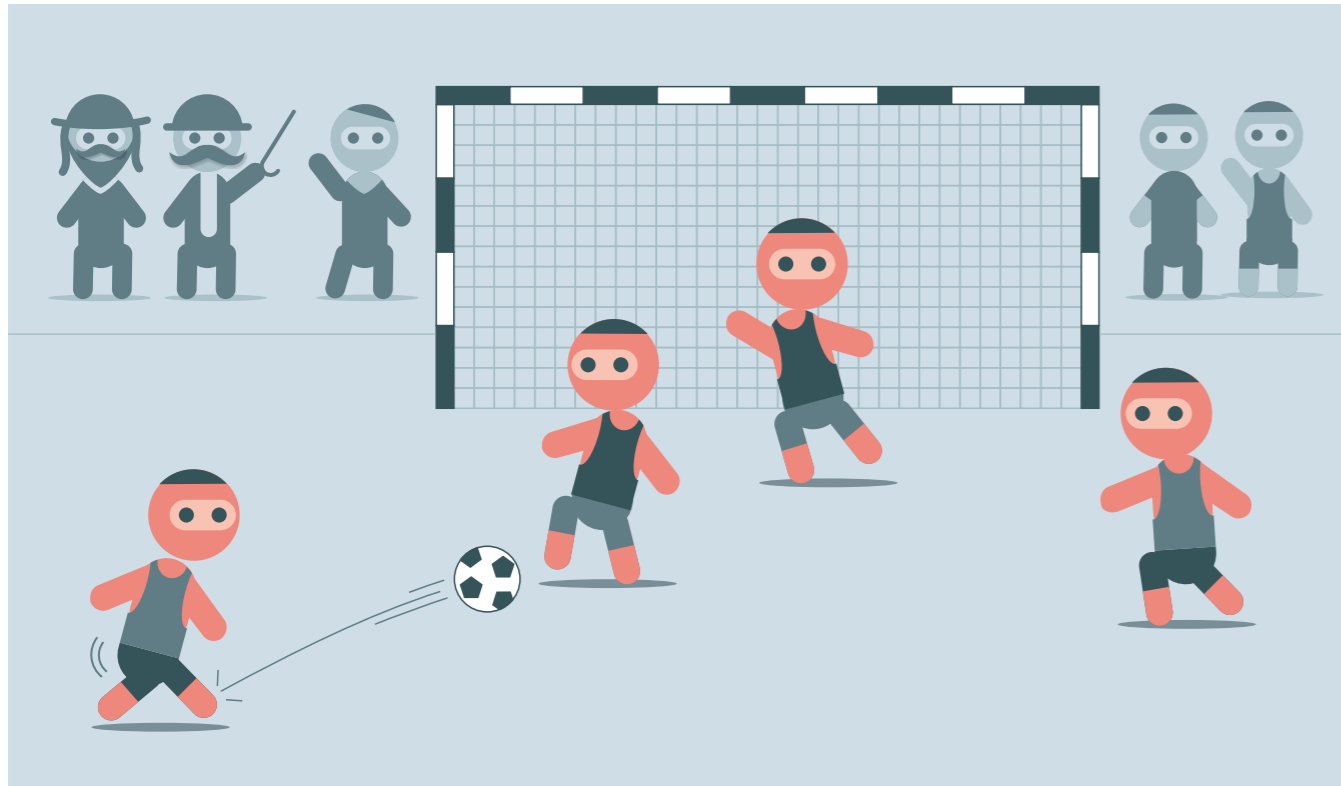
⁴⁸ Gražioji mūsų statyba. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1938 m. vasario 15 d., 48.

⁴⁹ Jolita Kančienė. Žydų indėlis į Kauno tarpukario architektūrą. *Žydų kultūros paveldas Lietuvoje*. Ed. A. Jomantas. Vilnius, 2005, 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁵¹ „Latvių ir lenkų pretenzijos yra be pagrindo“, sako B. V. Džonesas. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1939 m. gegužės 19 d., 9.

SPORTS AND CULTURAL LIFE



SPORTS

The Maccabi Gymnastics and Athletic Society was officially registered in Kaunas on October 19, 1920. On March 17, 1923, the society was renamed the Maccabi Jewish Sports and Gymnastics Union of Lithuania.¹ The association's motto was "A healthy soul in a healthy body", and its principal goal was "to strive for the physical and spiritual betterment of Jewish youth, and thereby rejuvenate the Jewish nation and land."²

In the 1920s and 1930s, various other Jewish athletic organizations were also established in Kaunas.

Religious views divided Jewish athletes. As far as we know, until now Lithuania has only had one Jewish (mostly Zionist) sports association – the Maccabi. We have now heard that there is a plan to establish another society, the Jewish Athletic Union.

Jewish Athletic Union. *Sportas*, 1924³

¹ Vyriausybės žinios. 1923, nr. 135, 4.

² Lietuvos Žydų sporto ir gimnastikos sąjungos „Makabi“ įstatai. LCVA, f.402, ap. 4, b. 722, 88.

³ Žydų Atletikos Sąjunga. *Sportas*, 1924, nr. 14–15, 114.

The Hakoah ("power" or "strength") Jewish sports organization was active in Kaunas between 1926 and 1933, and the Hapoel ("the worker") Jewish sports and gymnastics organization was established in 1933.⁴

Despite the diversity of other sports organizations that were active for various lengths of time, Maccabi remained the largest and most athletically accomplished organization in Lithuania.

A pan-Baltic gathering of Maccabi societies was held in Kaunas in 1937 and was welcomed as an "especially joyous event":

Perhaps no other nation has needed physical exercise more than the Jewish people. For centuries, the Jews have focused on honing their minds, to the neglect of their bodies. This produced horrible results. Jewish youth looked pale, with hunched backs – weak and sickly. This could not have left the spiritual realm unaffected. . . . In its physical training of Jewish youth, Maccabi not only performs a function for the internal affairs of the Jews, it also contributes to the general welfare of the country, because the state has an interest in ensuring the health and strength of its citizens. This is why Maccabi activities merit the greatest support not only from Jewish society, but from the state as well.

Welcoming the Maccabi Conference and the Baltic Maccabiah Games, 1937⁵

By the early 1920s, the growing Maccabi Union already had its own stadium, home to the union's football team. The stadium has since been demolished, but was located at what is now Jonava Street, by the Neris River. In 1925, the stadium hosted a unique event – a chess match played with live human figures. One team was led by Simon Gordon of Klaipėda, and the other – by Kaunas native Alexander Zisel (Ziskind) Macht. The match, which ended in a draw, attracted thousands of onlookers.⁶ A. Z. Macht went on to become a seven-time Lithuanian chess champion.

Maccabi members brought fame to Kaunas and Lithuania from the very first days of the union's existence and also helped introduce new fields of sport to Lithuania. It is believed that Maccabi club members were responsible for making table tennis popular

in Lithuania in the early 1920s. On March 26–27, 1938, Kaunas hosted the Baltic Table Tennis Championship, at which the Lithuanian team, represented by Vilius Varikakojis, Evgeny Nikolski, and Chaim Dushkes, won first place.⁷

Kaunas Maccabi is a comprehensive athletics organization that cultivates many different fields of sport, but especially table tennis. For this reason, table tennis has become particularly popular among Maccabi athletes. Thanks to this popularity, Maccabi has trained many young athletes whose skills are considered to be exceptional, including: Lurje, Goldberg, Alperavičiūtė, among others. The latter is especially noteworthy, since she has done extremely well in a series of matches. So, let us wish them even more success in this sport. The table tennis division is being successfully led by Messrs. Cristal, Tabachnik, and others.

Making Table Tennis Popular. *Apžvalga*, 1940⁸

Maccabi members also represented Lithuania in the Olympic Games. Tanchum Murnik, a Maccabi member, finished with the best results for interwar Lithuanian cyclists at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, placing 50th. Another Maccabi athlete, cyclist Isaac Anolik, competed in two Olympic Games: Paris in 1924 and Amsterdam in 1928. The winner of multiple Lithuanian championship titles, Anolik was murdered in the Holocaust, at the Ninth Fort outside Kaunas.

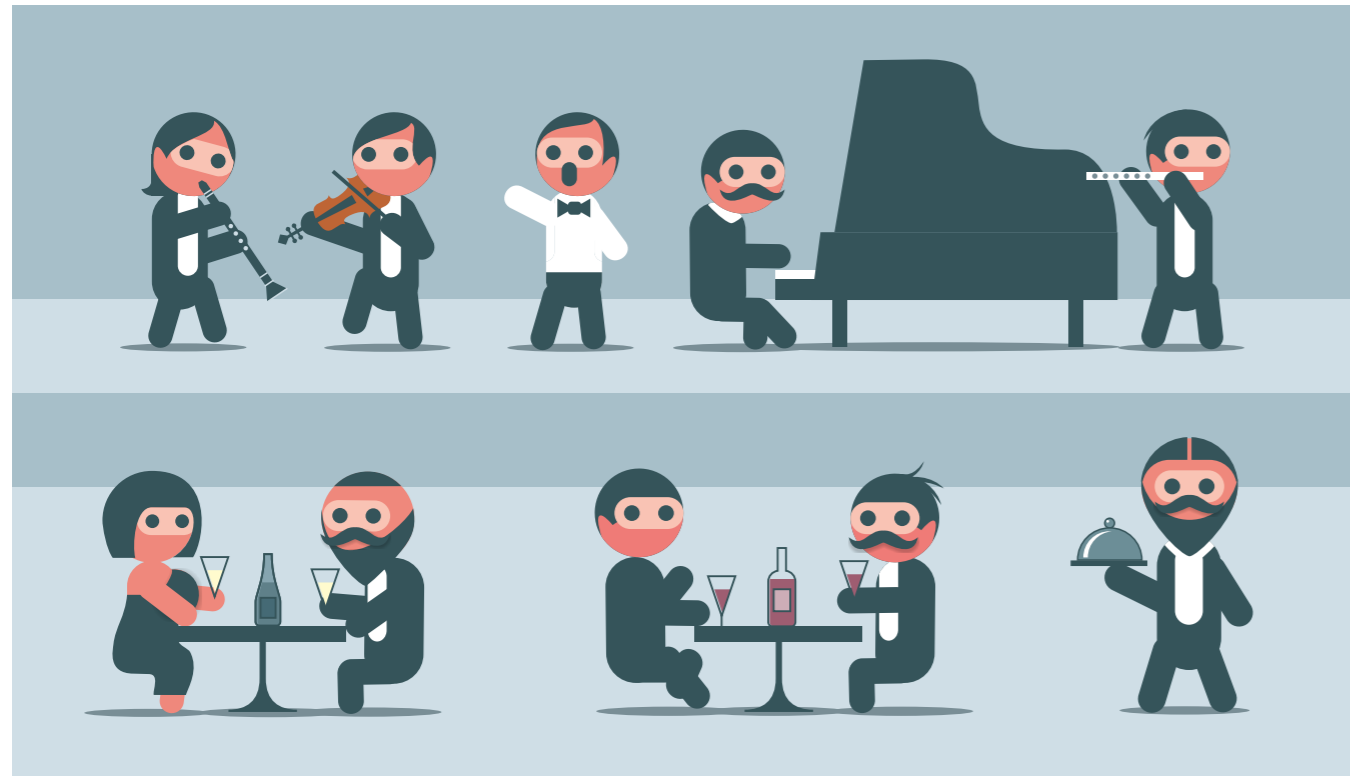
⁴ Vyriausybės žinios. II dalis. 1933, nr. 278, 6.

⁵ Sveikiname „Makabi“ sąskrydžio ir pabaltijo „Makabijados“ proga. *Apžvalga*, 1937 m. rugpjūčio 29 d., 1.

⁶ *Pažadėtoji žemė – Lietuva*. Ed. V. Kavaliauskas. Vilnius, 2013, 118.

⁷ Steponas Gečas, Arvydas Jakštas. Litvakai Lietuvos sporto sąjūdyje tarpukariu. <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2012-06-18-litvakai-lietuvos-sporto-saju-dyje-tarpukariu/>

⁸ S. teniso populiarumas. *Apžvalga*, 1940 m. balandžio 22 d., 8.



THE MUSIC SCENE

Musical life in Kaunas became more colorful in the mid-19th century with the creation of a local orchestra, which performed at a club in the City Hall, in theatres, and at significant ceremonies and celebrations. The Polish press of the day called the small but masterful eight-member orchestra one of the most brilliant stars on the Kaunas musical horizon.⁹

The orchestra was directed by violinist Vulf Ebanas, “a musician with a soul, good taste, and musical training, capable of enchanting his audiences. Many more famous violinists could envy his beautiful, melodious string work.”¹⁰ Ebanas was praised for being an “exceptionally gifted violinist, who with his wonderful, pure,

and skillful playing could today immediately become a soloist in the best opera houses in European capitals.”¹¹

In the late 19th century, Stupel became the conductor of the Kaunas Theatre orchestra. Stupel’s talent and role in building a professional orchestra was acknowledged by many of his contemporaries. Newspapers in Kaunas at the time wrote that:

“Extraordinary conducting talents and energy were required to create a decent ensemble from such a small and limited orchestra as we have, performing not only complex operettas, but also even operas. . . One should pay close attention to them during performances to become convinced how intensely riveted his body is at such moments.

9 *Ruch Muzyczny*, 1860, nr. 23, s. 382.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Kurjer Warszawski*, 1857, nr. 214, s. 1166.

One hand accompanies on the piano, while the other conducts the orchestra.”¹²

As the musical scene in Kaunas grew and matured, the Kaunas Musical Society was established in 1882, which included the active participation of the city’s Jewish artists. One of the society’s members, V. Robman, opened a school of music housed in a building owned by the merchant C. Rumshishky (now at Laisvės Alėja 89).¹³

At the turn of the 20th century, young people wanting to sing or discuss music were invited to the Tailors’ Synagogue by the cantor’s eldest son. The synagogue has since been demolished but was located at the corner of what is now No. 7 Druskininkų and No. 8 Puodžių Streets. Initially, the young men and women who gathered there weren’t much interested in Jewish music, which they considered “low brow” and not of interest to intellectuals. This view changed after performances by the Hazomir (“nightingale”) Society’s singers in Kaunas. After hearing the group’s repertoire, young people in Kaunas not only became intrigued by Jewish music, they also began to sing songs written by Yiddish theatre pioneer Abraham Goldfaden, and soon staged a performance of his operetta *Sulamita*, with an orchestra, choir, set decorations, and actors – some of whom they had to recruit from nearby towns.¹⁴

Under the name Jewish Musical and Dramatic Art Lovers, the musicians performed *Sulamita* in April 1906 at the City Theatre. The production was directed by Leib Shuster (Kadison), who later established the Vilner Trupe theatre company in Vilnius. All proceeds from ticket sales were donated to help the poor in Kaunas.¹⁵ The performances drew audiences from both the Jewish community and others in Kaunas, including the local governor, and received extremely positive reviews.¹⁶

The Jewish Music, Drama, and Singing Society was founded in Kaunas in 1907, with a mission to promote choral singing and

12 *Ковенский театр. Прибавление к Ковенским губернским ведомостям*, 1890, № 54.

13 *Правила Ковенской музыкальной школы В. Робмана*. Ковна, 1887

14 Jeffrey Veidlinger. *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire (The Modern Jewish Experience)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, 220.

15 Program for Avrom Goldfaden’s operetta *Shulamis*, printed on silk, Kovno, Russian Empire (now Kaunas, Lith.), 1906 (YIVO). https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Goldfadn_Avrom

16 Miriam Niv. *Kaunas. Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities. Lithuania*. Ed. Prof. Dov Levin. Jerusalem, 1996. https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_lita/lit_00512.html

the musical and dramatic arts.¹⁷ The society performed various works by Abraham Goldfaden, including the drama *Bar Kokhba* and the operetta *Doctor Almasada*. Within a few years, some of the society’s members established an orchestra.¹⁸

Music lovers in Kaunas were not only treated to performances by local musicians but were also able to attend concerts given by visiting performers. On May 2, 1909, the City Theatre hosted one of the first performances by Jascha Heifetz, then only eight years old, who went on to become a world-renowned violinist:

*The young violinist Heifetz has caused a proper commotion. He is only eight years old, barely visible from a distance, and only recently began to speak, but he is already boldly walking on stage and performing Mendelssohn’s concerto and Sarasate’s Concert Fantasy on Faust. And how we plays! With his bold and precise bow stroke, his performance is so musical that it is a joy to listen. The audience was enchanted by this talented boy and could only wonder from where such a phenomenon had emerged.*¹⁹

Twenty-six years later, a similar, if not greater, commotion was stirred up by Kaunas-born pianist Chaim Potashinsky:

As you may know, our small wunderkind, the thirteen-year-old pianist Chaim Potashinsky, left a few months ago for a concert tour of Italy. This exceptional boy has captured attention in the most distant countries, including by the press in São Paulo, the U.S. newspaper Morning Journal, and the News Chronicle in London, all of whom mention Potashinsky’s roots in Lithuania. The largest daily in Milan, Ambrosiana, had a particularly favorable review of his tour, calling Potashinsky the first musician of such talent – a true wunderkind – to have performed in Milan after the Great War. . . . As we can see, our pianist found great success in Italy and has thereby also promoted Lithuania’s name abroad.

How Fares Lithuania’s Wunderkind?
Rytas, 1935²⁰

Chaim Potashinsky graduated from the Kaunas Conservatory in 1938 and then lectured at the Lithuanian Music Academy

17 *Устав Еврейского музыкально-драматическо-певческого общества в г. Ковне*. Ковна, 1907.

18 Jeffrey Veidlinger. *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, 220.

19 Cited from Leonidas Melnikas. Heifetzas sugrižta... 2017-04-01. <https://www.muzikusajunga.lt/naujiena/heifetzas-sugrizta>

20 Kaip sekasi lietuviškajam vunderkindui? *Rytas*, 1935 m. rugsėjo 14 d., 6.



Leiba Hofmekler. Caricature by Lazar Kagan. *Meno dienos*, 1935, No. 9

(formerly the Lithuanian Conservatory) for fifty years. He also toured Finland, Germany, Norway, Poland, and the Soviet Union.²¹

Vladislas (Vlado) Perlemuter, another talented musician, was born in Kaunas in 1904. After leaving Lithuania for Paris in 1907 with his parents, he began learning piano at the age of eight and later studied at the Paris Conservatoire. Perlemuter became famous after he played all of Maurice Ravel's complete piano works at public recitals in Paris.²² The famous French pianist from Kaunas was likely the son of Leon Perlemuter, the cantor at the Kaunas Choral Synagogue. Perlemuter also composed music and published a collection of piano compositions for two Jewish songs in Kaunas in 1901.²³

21 Vaclovas Juodpusis. Chaimas Potašinskas. *Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija*, 2010. <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/Chaimas-Potasinskas-6571>

22 Leonidas Melnikas. Lietuvos žydų muzikinis paveldas (XIX a. pabaiga – XX a. I pusė). *Lietuvos muzikologija*, 2006, t. 7, 86.

23 Leon Perlmutter. Zwei jüdische Gesänge : für Männerchor mit Begleitung des Pianoforte. Kovno, 1901.

A Jewish choir was established in Kaunas in the 1920s, helping to popularize Jewish folk songs.

It's now been one year since the founding of the Engel Jewish National Choir in Kaunas, named after Jewish composer [Joel Engel]. The choir has taken on the mission to study Jewish music, develop Jewish folk songs, and promote them among the Jewish community. ... After several of its public performances on the stages of Kaunas' theatres, the name Engel has won the hearts of many in the Jewish community and generated considerable interest in its future activities and growth, convincing many that the choir has established a suitable cultural and artistic level.

October 19, 1928 petition to the Kaunas City Board²⁴

The musical scene in interwar Kaunas was also enriched by local and foreign Jewish performers. Musicians from the Stupel and Hofmekler families were particularly active in the city.²⁵

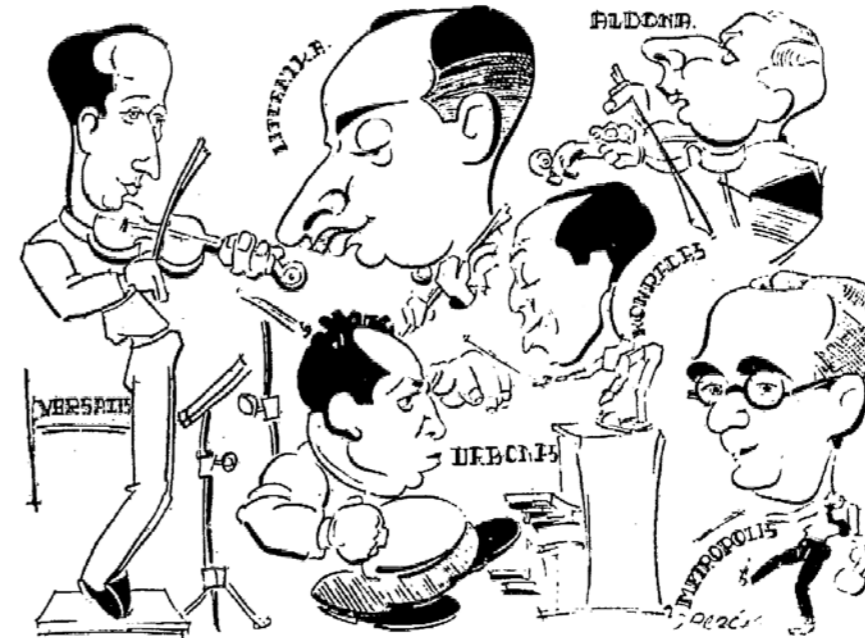
The musical Hofmekler family moved from Vilnius to Kaunas after it became Lithuania's provisional capital. In 1921, Leib Hofmekler was appointed concertmaster pianist at the State Theatre in Kaunas and later conducted orchestras at the State Theatre and the Kaunas Radiofonas radio station. His brother, Michael Hofmekler, was a famous violinist and conductor. From 1920 until the outbreak of World War II, he played the violin at the State Theater and then conducted the Kaunas Radiofonas ensemble in 1940–1941. Michael Hofmekler helped produce the first radio music shows. On July 1, 1926, "Hofmekler's seven-piece orchestra performed the first musical concert over the radio, launching a new radio craze in Lithuania."²⁶ In 1932, Michael Hofmekler was awarded the Order of Grand Duke Gediminas, 4th class, in recognition of his artistic career and his contributions to Lithuania.

These and other musicians also performed with their ensembles at Kaunas' most popular restaurants, where a so-called "small stage scene" had begun to emerge. The Metropolis and Versalis restaurants, the Konradas confectionary, and the Monika and Aldona cafés drew customers with musical programs performed mostly by Jewish musicians who often appeared at various

24 1928 m. spalio 29 d. prašymas Kauno miesto valdybai. LCVA, f. 552, ap. 2, b. 76, l. 3.

25 Laima Kiauleikytė. Kauno muzikos draugija ir lietuvių muzikinės kultūros kontekstas. *Menotyra*, 2010, t. 17, nr. 3, 205.

26 Cited from Leonidas Melnikas. Lietuvos žydų muzikinis paveldas, 88.



KAUNO LINKSMINTOJAI.

Kauno restoranų ir kavinių kapelų dirigentai: „Versalio“ p. Ceitelis, „Lituanikos“ p. Hofmekleris, „Aldonos“ p. Stupelis, Urbono p. Bandas, Konrado p. Pomerancas ir „Metropolio“ p. Zaidmanas.

"Kauno linksmitojai" (Kaunas Entertainers). Caricature by Juozas Penčyla. *Sekmadienis*, 8 September 1935

different venues. M. Hofmekler, I. Vildman-Zaidman, Joseph and Abraham Stupel, Daniel Pomerantz, Chanan Tzeitel, Mordechai Borstein, Percy Haid and others were the principal leaders and soloists of restaurant and café orchestras in the interwar years.²⁷

The Metropolis is not just a serious venue. It also knows how to be fun as well, how to maintain a balance between entertainment and quiet solemnity, a balance particularly appreciated by English gentlemen. The orchestra conducted by Mr. M. Hofmekler performs at the Metropolis during lunch and in the evenings. The group has even come to be known as the "Hofmeklerband", a name also made popular among Lithuanian listeners through records and broadcasts over Kaunas radio.

The Metropolis. Where High Society Passes the Time. *Naujas žodis*, 1932²⁸

27 Ibid., 90.

28 „Metropolis“. Vieta, kur aukštoji visuomenė praleidžia laiką. *Naujas žodis*, 1932 m., nr. 7, 136.

And then, after lunch, "all of Kaunas" gathers at the Konradas. The already famous and beloved orchestra under violinist Pomerantz now with the addition of the violinist Kravetz has finally won over every heart in Kaunas. It is no surprise, then, that finding an empty seat in the evening at the Konradas has become harder than finding a lady of Kaunas willing to wear last season's hat... There is no secret to the success of the Konradas Café. Above all, only the best is on offer here. Take the cozy new furniture and add the temperamental music played by violinist Pomerantz and the secret is soon revealed.

The Extraordinary Success of the Konradas Confectionary, *Diena*, 1936²⁹

The origins of the popular music that became so admired in interwar Kaunas are most often associated with the phenomenon that was Danielius Dolkskis. Dolkskis was encouraged to travel to

29 Nepaprastas Konrado cukrainės pasisekimas. *Diena*, 1936 m. rugsėjo 20 d., 4



Sculpture of Danielius Dolskis (by Romas Kvintas, 2007).
Laisvės Alėja, Kaunas. Photograph: Darius Petreikis



Recordings by Danielius Dolskis and the M. Hofmekler Orchestra.
1930s. LNB

Kaunas from St. Petersburg in 1929 after meeting Kaunas-born violinist D. Pomerantz, then a student in Berlin.³⁰ Once in Kaunas, Dolskis began singing at the Versalis and Metropolis restaurants and soon became wildly popular throughout the city. Dolskis selected the most internationally popular songs for his repertoire and, after learning Lithuanian in a remarkably brief period of time, composed his own Lithuanian lyrics for the melodies. After mastering Lithuanian, Dolskis performed witty monologues and parodies on current events. Indeed, the newspaper *Diena* came to call Dolskis “the entertainer of Kaunas”³¹

Almost immediately upon his arrival in the city, Dolskis began winning over the hearts of the people of Kaunas.

Every night, the hall at the Versalis is full. This is truly an exceptionally talented person: Not only did he learn Lithuanian perfectly in six months, he also created a unique genre of Lithuanian couplets and storytelling which we've never heard before. What were we able to see on the so-called “small stage” before Dolskis?! We could listen to programs in all sorts of languages, but not in Lithuanian. And when it was in Lithuanian, well... better not to speak of it. And those

Lithuanian artists who might actually be able to bring something to the “small stage” simply can't, because they've devoted themselves entirely to the “big stage”...

But here we have someone who has completely shattered the popular opinion most had come to hold about the “rigid” Lithuanian language. He has a very sensitive response to all the questions of the day. When the newspapers publish the latest decision from the Hague Tribunal, the very next day Dolskis is singing a catchy little song about it, bringing joy not only to Lithuanians, but to foreigners as well, and not just the Poles! And as soon as Kaunas audiences hear the popular German schlager tune “Ich bin ja heut so glücklich” at the cinema, Dolskis is already leading his audience in the Lithuanian version: “I'm so happy today!” And, most importantly, his is not some blind translation – the text is peppered with events from our daily lives and the audience falls even harder for Dolskis.

A. Gulkis. The Entertainer of Kaunas. *Diena*, 1931³²

Danielius Dolskis died in 1931 and is buried at the Žaliakalnis Jewish Cemetery in Kaunas.

³⁰ Rūta Skudienė. Legendiniai mažosios scenos artistai. *Žydy kultūros paveldas Lietuvoje*. Ed. A. Jomantas. Vilnius, 2005, 108.

³¹ Ant. Gulkis. Žmogus, kuris linksmina Kauną. *Diena*, 1931 m. lapkričio 8 d., 5.

³² Ibid.



Liaudies namai (People's House), since demolished. Corner of Šv. Gertrūdės and A. Mapu Streets, Kaunas. 1920s. A. Burkus Collection

THEATRE COMPANIES AND SOCIETIES

The first Jewish theatre in Kaunas began performing before the First World War. One of its founders was Leib Kadison, an actor, director, and set designer. His daughter, Luba Kadison, wrote about her father in her memoirs:

Leib Kadison acquired a hobby. He organized an amateur theatre group to perform plays by well-known Yiddish writers. In addition to producing, directing, and acting, he designed and painted the scenery. He did that so well that the State Opera House of Kovno (led by Gabrielius Lanas – Ed.) hired him as a scenic designer. . . . When visitors came to our home, father would put me up on a chair and say, “Luba, recite something.” I knew a few Yiddish songs that Father had taught me, and I willingly complied. This is how I got my first applause, which I greatly enjoyed.

The distinguished Yiddish playwright Pertz Hirschbein often visited our home when he came to Kovno. . . . The famous author Sholom Asch and other Yiddish writers also visited us in Kovno, attracted by my father’s growing reputation as a man of the theatre and by my mother’s generous hospitality within a truly Jewish home.

Chanah perceived her husband’s public appearances as an actor as something beneath the dignity of a master craftsman and respected citizen. But she said little and busied herself with rearing her children and keeping house for her husband, his workers and apprentices.³³

³³ Luba Kadison, Joseph Buloff, Irving Genn. *On Stage, Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre*. Harvard University Library, 1992, 3–4.

In 1915, an edict from the Tsar forced the Kadison family, like all Jews in Kaunas, to immediately abandon the city. After arriving in Vilnius, Kadison soon established the Vilner Trupe, recruiting his daughter Luba into the company as well. Around 1917, the company toured Kaunas, performing plays by Mikhail Artsybashev and Hermann Sudermann.³⁴

After joining the Jewish Music, Drama, and Singing Society, Isidor Israel Elyashev introduced society members to the latest Yiddish theatre repertoire. With his help, the theatre performed works by David Pinski and Jacob Gordin. Over time, the society grew to over 500 members and began to rent theatre halls to perform plays, concerts, holiday celebrations, and host lectures by guest speakers.³⁵

Jewish theatre life resumed in Kaunas in 1919. In July of that year, Reuven Rubinstein and several likeminded artists established the first Jewish drama club in Kaunas, devoted to “bringing Jewish dramatic art to the broader Jewish public in Kaunas.”³⁶

The Society for New Jewish Drama Theatre in Kaunas was founded in late 1919.³⁷

The Jewish Literary, Music, and Drama Society was established in 1921. Its founders included Abraham Goldberg and Abba Balosher. The society sought to “focus all Jewish cultural efforts in the field of literature, music, and drama and established a cultural institution to give Jewish residents a chance to spend their free time in a beneficial and pleasant way.”³⁸

The Kunst Vinkl Kaunas Jewish Musical Theatre Society opened in 1922, followed by the Unser Vinkl Kaunas Jewish Theatre Lovers’ Club in 1925.³⁹ The latter organization operated out of what was then No. 13 Maironio Street. And while the diversity of clubs and societies showed the potential of theatrical life in Kaunas, most of them were active only briefly, not leaving much of a mark on the cultural life of the city.

The Kaunas Jewish Theatre, directed by Leonid Sokolov, was established in Kaunas in 1920, staging mostly popular Yiddish

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Jeffrey Veidlinger. *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, 220.

³⁶ LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, b. 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, b. 125.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, b. 183.



The Kadison family. First row, from left: Luba, Paula, and Isaac. Second row: Hana and Leib. Kaunas. 1912. Luba Kadison, Joseph Buloff, Irving Genn. *On Stage, Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre*. Harvard University Library, 1992

plays and operettas at the Liaudies Namai (People’s House) and City Garden. By 1924, however, the company had disbanded.⁴⁰

There were also attempts in the early 1920s to stage plays in Hebrew in Kaunas, principally by the Jewish Acting Studio – established by the Kultur Lyge – between 1922 and 1924.⁴¹ Those efforts were later continued in 1926 by the Tarbut Society’s

⁴⁰ For more see: Ina Pukelytė. *Žydų teatras tarpukario Lietuvoje*. Kaunas, 2017, 58–67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117–120.



Actors performing in the pantomime production *Love for Three Oranges* at the Jewish Acting Studio. Kaunas. 1923. VGŽIM, *limis.lt*

Hebrew Acting Studio which, according to a 1931 newspaper account, “had already far surpassed the limits of the studio and has become a serious and artistically valued Jewish theatre.”⁴²

Yiddish theatre faced a difficult road, but new hope was kindled by the founding of the Kaunas Jewish Theatre in 1928.

In October, 1928, the well-known artists Mr. David Michailov and Mrs. Sofia Erdi, together with the talented and experienced entrepreneur Mr. Lan organized a new company, determined to perform artistic and at least tolerable, decent theatre. . . . Jewish theatre has trod a

difficult and thorny path. And although it has yet to reach artistic heights, it should be said that such aspirations do exist. Such an aspiration, with such energy, devotion, and self-sacrifice is, without a doubt, to be welcomed and supported.

G. Valkauskas. The Kaunas Jewish Theatre. *Naujas žodis*, 1929⁴³

Premiering with a performance of *Sulamita* in 1928, the Kaunas Jewish Theatre was initially officially registered in 1929 as the New Jewish Theatre Society, founded by R. Rubinstein, Vladimir Lazerson, Sofia Erdi, G. Lan, Zalman Traub and Boris Beilinson. In official documents, the society was listed as the “New Jewish

42 Kaip hebrajų vaidybos studija minėjo teatro sukaktuves. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1931 m. sausio 7 d., 5.

43 G. Valkauskas. Kauno žydų teatras. *Naujas žodis*, 1929, nr. 2, 17.

Theatre in Lithuania under the direction of Gabriel Lan.⁴⁴ Later, the theatre was led for four years by Boris Bukantz.⁴⁵

The organizer and director of the theatre, Gabriel Lan, accomplished a great and honorable feat, collecting all the remnants of previous Jewish theatres and assembling them into a compact and hard object. This is no longer just some hack job by professional artists, or a puny, amateur playhouse – this is a proper theatre with all the signs of serious work and ethnic spirit.

B. Dauguvietis. The New Jewish Theatre. *7 meno dienos*, 1929⁴⁶

For several years now, Kaunas has had a privately founded and funded permanent Jewish theatre. Jews don't expect their theatre to be attended by broader Lithuanian society, of course – language denies that opportunity. But they can legitimately expect their work to be acknowledged by Lithuanian society. In truth, our society doesn't have the slightest understanding that such a huge cultural endeavor is being undertaken in a small corner of the Kaunas Old Town called the Liaudies Namai. A wonderful group of people have come together there and, with great devotion and despite the greatest material shortcomings, create beautiful theatre. . . . Having essentially begun from nothing, in just a few years the Kaunas Jewish Theatre has reached such heights that, in terms of artistry, it has far surpassed the Vilnius Jewish Theatre, and even the Riga Jewish Theatre which, as we know, receives a handsome government subsidy. And what is most wonderful about the Kaunas Jewish Theatre is that they sincerely feel themselves to be loyal citizens of our country, wanting their homeland to grow, prosper, and flourish culturally. . . . This Jewish theatre, by undertaking such a great cultural effort and working above all in the service of Lithuania, and for the welfare and cultural growth of Lithuania's citizens – this theatre is perceived, one might say, as a stepchild by official government institutions. By ignoring these wonderful Jewish cultural efforts, Lithuanian society is committing a great injustice. At the very least, our moral support for this theatre would help it better endure its difficult circumstances.

T. Sebaldus. The Kaunas Jewish Theatre. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1931⁴⁷

44 LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 809.

45 Ina Pukelytė. *Žydų teatras tarpukario Lietuvoje*. Kaunas, 2017, 50.

46 Borisas Dauguvietis. *Naujas Žydų Teatras. 7 meno dienos*, 1929 m., nr. 34, 7.

47 T. Sebaldus. Kauno žydų teatras. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1931 m. sausio 13 d., 6.



A promotional poster for the Kaunas Jewish Theatre. Kaunas. 1920s–1930s. LTMKM

In 1933, the theatre marked its fifth-year anniversary. In that time, the New Jewish Theatre, now led by Mr. G. Lan, has performed more than 500 plays in Kaunas and in the provinces, staging nearly 100 premieres.

Commemorating Five Years of the Kaunas New Jewish Theatre. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1933⁴⁸

48 Kauno „Naujojo Žydų Teatro“ 5 m. sukaktuvės. *Lietuvos aidas*, 1933 m. sausio 23 d., 7.

Soon thereafter, however, Lan reported that the New Jewish Theatre Society would be disbanded on August 15, 1934, probably due to financial difficulties.⁴⁹

There were also other Jewish theatres in Kaunas. In 1937, four such companies were active in Kaunas at one time. The Jewish Theatre in Lithuania and the Jewish Minority Theatre companies were considered professional.⁵⁰

At this opportunity, please allow me to inform you that I founded the Jewish Minority Theatre in Lithuania in 1929, and it has been in operation since that time, receiving a small annual stipend from the Ministry of Education. Under my direction, the theatre employs 35 Lithuanian citizens (actors, musicians, and technical staff). The theatre performs in Kaunas and also serves Jewish residents in rural areas, occasionally touring various Jewish settlements. Our repertoire consists of Jewish dramatic works, comedies, and operettas. As is evident from my submitted certification, I have also endeavored to raise the theatre's cultural level as much as possible.

B. Bukantz to the Lithuanian Minister of Education, 1939⁵¹

I allow myself to direct Your Excellency's attention to the following achievements of my consistently serious theatre: 1. From the start of Jewish theatre activities in Lithuania I have been a resident of Vilnius and have staged a work by a Lithuanian author, translated into the Jewish language, at my theatre. On the occasion of the birthday of Kipras Petrauskas, I staged Petras Vaičiūnas' Nuodėmingas Angelas (Sinful Angel), and all of the profits from this performance were given to the birthday fund. 2. Whenever the opportunity has arisen, the theatre under my direction has supported the Weapons' Fund. . . . In the past three years, I have succeeded in raising the theatre to a such a level that it does not disgrace Jewish society.

R. Berger to the Lithuanian Minister of Education, 1939⁵²

In October 1939, the Minister of Education permitted the creation of the Kaunas Jewish Theatre supported by its own funding, a step taken after an appeal from Kaunas actors.

*Until now, Jewish theatres in Lithuania have hired Jewish actors and foreign touring performers. Due to the present situation, foreign performers are no longer able to come [to Lithuania], and for this reason theatre directors have no interest in further supporting Jewish theatre activities, since they are afraid that, without such touring performers, theatres will be unable to cover their expenses. We, the aforementioned Jewish theatre actors and citizens of Lithuania, and those who will be invited to work with us even later, have become accustomed to working without receiving the established wages and always essentially risking the loss of our income. We continue to be determined to perform in the Jewish language, even in the absence of an assured foundation, and to promote the performing arts among the Jews of Lithuania.*⁵³

Private Jewish theatres ceased their activities in Kaunas after the onset of the first Soviet occupation. The Kaunas Jewish Theatre established by the Soviet regime in September 1940 was dissolved on July 1, 1941, during the subsequent Nazi occupation.⁵⁴

53 Ibid.

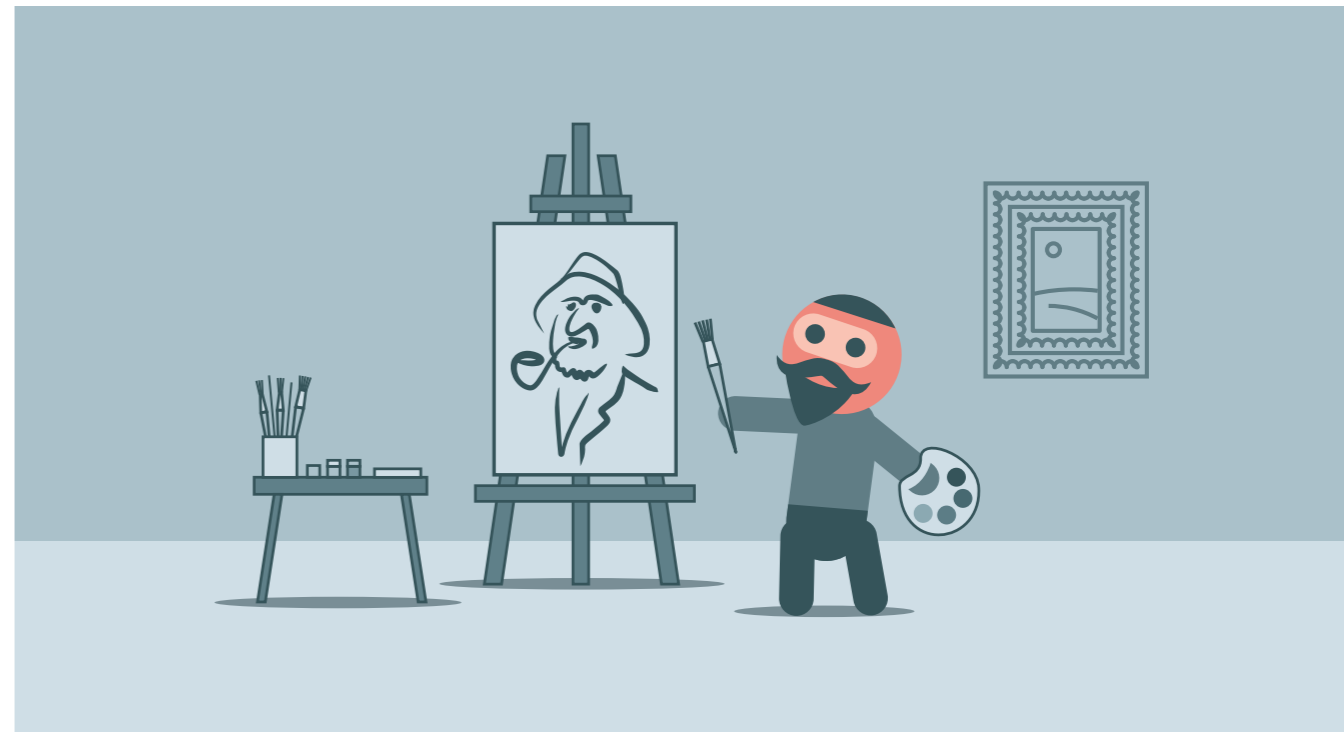
54 Sumažės teatrų skaičius. / *laisvę*, 1941 m. liepos 5 d., 3.

49 LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 809.

50 For more see: Ina Pukelytė. *Žydų teatras tarpukario Lietuvoje*. Kaunas, 2017, 105–114.

51 LCVA, f. 391, ap. 4, b. 1681.

52 Ibid.



ARTISTS

About one third of the student body at the Vilnius School of Drawing, which existed from 1866 to 1915, were Jews born on the former lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁵⁵ Among them was the Kaunas-born artist Lazar Krestin, who continued his studies in Vienna, Odessa, and Munich. Krestin was named by his contemporaries as one of the most important Jewish artists.⁵⁶ Today, his works are held by the largest Jewish museums in Western Europe and the United States, art museums in Israel, as well as by private collectors and galleries around the world.⁵⁷

Some artists who had lived in Vilnius, such as Shalom Zelmanovich, Akim Yosim, and Isaai Kulvianski, moved to Kaunas after it became

Lithuania's provisional capital.⁵⁸ Jacob Messenblum (Jacques Mis-sene) and Joseph Levinson-Bari, who had lived in Moscow and St. Petersburg, respectively, also returned to Kaunas in 1919–1920. Jewish artists became involved in the cultural life of Kaunas, actively showing their work in exhibitions and taking part in the work of the Kaunas School of the Arts, established in 1922. The school's director, Justinas Vienožinskis, assembled a team of talented teachers and built a modern curriculum for young artists.⁵⁹ Sixty Jewish-heritage students graduated from the school between 1922 and 1940, of which the best known are Neemija Arbit Blatas, Zale Beker, Chaim Meyer Feinstein, and Max Leib Ginsburg.⁶⁰

58 Rasa Žukienė. Art in exile: the emigration experiences and mobility of artists in XIX–XX century: the case of Lithuania. *Meno istorija ir kritika*, nr. 12. Kaunas: VDU, 2016, 60.

59 Antanas Andrijauskas. Litvakų modernios tapybos tradicijų tęstinumas Lietuvoje. *@eitis*, 2015, t. 86, 6.

60 Rasa Žukienė. Art in exile, 60–61.

55 *Lietuva litvakų kūryboje*. Ed. Vilma Gradinskaitė, Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2018, 20.

56 *The Menorah Journal*, 1926, vol. 12–13, 111.

57 Lazar Krestin. <http://www.daile.lt/artist/krestin-lazar-99159483/>



Shalom Zelmanovich. *Old Kaunas. 1920s–1930s.* NČDM

Lithuanian and Jewish artists developed mutual cultural connections in Kaunas. For example, Antanas Gudaitis recalled that:

While at the Vienožinskis studio, I worked together with the Jewish artists Lipshitz and Yosim. We had an attic in the Old Town, on Lukšio Street, not far from the Liaudies Namai. Students from the Jewish

*seminary would come to pose for us – Hasidim with yarmulkas, payot, and white socks. They were impressive looking. I painted them, but those works are long gone now. I recall they weren't that bad.*⁶¹

⁶¹ *Kauno dailininkų žydų kūryba ir likimas.* Ed. Irina Nikitina, Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2007, 5–6.

In the interwar years, young artists frequently migrated between Kaunas and Paris. Graduates of the Kaunas School of the Arts were able to receive stipends from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, which made it possible for them to study for a few years at the National Art School and private schools in Paris and other Western European schools. Lithuanian and Jewish artists sometimes studied at the same schools and, after returning home, held joint art exhibitions, belonged to the same arts associations and did all they could to enrich and modernize artistic life in Kaunas. Some of them, including Gudaitis and Neemija Arbit Blatas, became close friends.⁶²

Among the most active participants in the artistic life of Kaunas were Arbit Blatas, Max Band, Jacob Messenblum, Zale Beker, Chaim Meyer Feinstein, Cherne Pertzikovich (Percikovičiūtė), Shalom Zelmanovich, M. L. Ginsburg, Jacque Koslowsky (Jokūbas Kazlauskas), and many others⁶³ who held solo and group exhibitions.

The group exhibition of works by Jewish artists, compared to a show by independent Lithuanian artists, is more modern and youthful. The Lithuanians gained their understanding of painting primarily in Lithuania, such that the European art of various periods came to them as a distant echo. The foundations of their work rested less on the postulates of various different schools than on their own internal critique, their surrounding environment, the limited legacy of older artists, and the traits of their own nation. Most of the Jews had studied and continue to train in the artistic centers of Europe, thus the influence of European art, particularly modern art and that of individual artists, is much more prominent in their work. . . . It is my hope that we see more such exhibitions in Kaunas in the future – they bring with them the reflection of new worlds.

J. Vienožinskis. A Group Exhibition by Lithuanian and Latvian Jewish Artists. *Naujoji Romuva*, 1931⁶⁴

An exhibition of the works of Isaii Kulvianski opened in Kaunas in 1932.

Kulvianski is a true child of our modern age. He belongs among those artists of our time who created expressionism in their fight

⁶² Rasa Žukienė. *Art in exile*, 60.

⁶³ Antanas Andrijauskas. *Litvakų modernios tapybos tradicijų tęstinumas Lietuvoje*, 8.

⁶⁴ J. Vienožinskis. *Kolektyvinė Lietuvos ir Latvijos žydų dailininkų meno paroda. Naujoji Romuva*, 1931 m., nr. 3, 67–68.



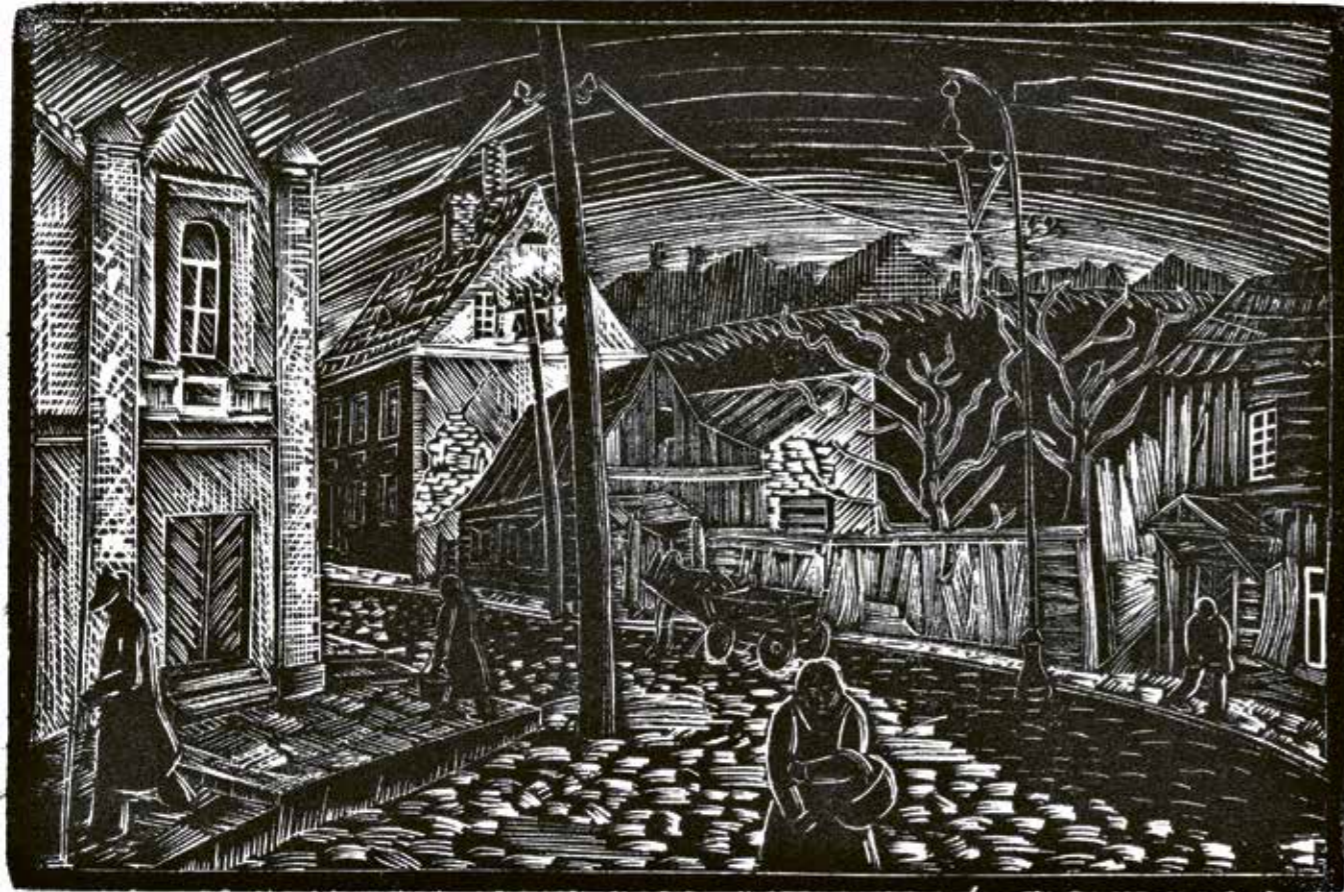
Černė Percikovičiūtė. *My Friend Judith.* c. 1937. NČDM

against realism. . . . It should also be noted that this is the first exhibition of expressionist forms in Kaunas. An exhibition of German graphic art was held at the Pribačis (Priebatsch) Bookstore several years ago which, because it included only a handful of small expressionist paintings, could not have shaped an opinion about the specifics of expressionism which this current exhibition of Kulvianski's oil paintings has succeeded in doing.

J. Veisbartas. *Radical Anti-Realism. Vairas*, 1932⁶⁵

In December 1935, the Lithuanian Artists' Union organized the first autumn art exhibition, showcasing sixty established artists working in various styles in Lithuania. According to Justinas

⁶⁵ J. Veisbartas. *Radikalusis antirealizmas. Vairas*, 1932 m., nr. 7–8, 389, 391.



Chaim Meyer Feinstein. *Small Street in Kaunas*. 1930s. Mirrored woodcut print. Depicting a corner near the Hasidic Synagogue (now the corner of Gimnazijos and A. Mackevičiaus Streets). NČDM

Vienožinskis, the exhibition, opened at the Vytautas the Great Museum:

... is larger in terms of exhibited works and more valuable in its artistic quality than any other art exhibition previously held in Lithuania. ... The modernist Jews follow the same principles and aspire to goals shared by our modernists. With his subtle approach to color and form, Streichman presented civilized images in general. The material and concentrated Beker is able to take a deeper look at the whole of nature. Messenblum doesn't shy away from sincerity and speaks in more austere colors. In this he is closer to Markus. The neorealist Kazlauskas (Koslowsky) is stylish and logical, but the most original and

most subtle is the young, extremely talented artist Percikovičiūtė. She imitates no one and hasn't even seen any of the world-renowned painters, but by studying our pensive Christ figurines and folk art she has found an entirely different worldview of her own.⁶⁶

Vienožinskis considered Percikovičiūtė to be his most gifted student.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ J. Vienožinskis. Pirmoji rudens meno paroda. *Naujoji Romuva*, 1936, nr. 1, 5, 7.

⁶⁷ Violeta Krištopaitytė. Černė Percikovičiūtė: 29 žingsniai tarp nežinomybės ir istorijos sutemų. *Dailė*, nr. 1, 2013, 140.



Chaim Meyer Feinstein. *Kaunas. Old Town Street*. 1932. Mirrored woodcut print. Depicting an intersection in Old Town (now the corner of L. Zamenhofo and Kurpių Streets). NČDM

A solo exhibition of works by Esther Lurie, of Palestine, who was visiting Kaunas at the time, was held at the Lithuanian Artists' Union (on today's Maironio Street) in December 1939–January 1940. The show included forty-four of Lurie's paintings.⁶⁸ Another exhibition of her work, entitled *Ballet*, was later shown at the Kaunas Music Theatre. Lurie's exhibitions were extremely well received and her works were later acquired by the city's Jewish organizations and the Vytautas the Great Museum.⁶⁹ During the

war, Lurie was confined in the Kaunas ghetto, where she continued to create works of art that bore witness to the horrific reality around her.

In January 1940, the Lithuanian Society of Women Artists organized an exhibition of works by thirty-seven female artists in Lithuania, including Percikovičiūtė, Esther Lurie, Tzila Epstein (Epšteinaitė), Mina Karn (Karnienė), and Gitel Lurie (Lurytė), all residents of Kaunas.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Paroda. Tapyba ir akvarelė. Esther Lurie. Kaunas, 1939.

⁶⁹ Pnina Rosenberg. Esther Lurie. <http://art.holocaust-education.net/explore.asp?langid=1&submenu=200&id=6>

⁷⁰ *Pirmosios Lietuvos moterų dailininkių draugijos dailės parodos katalogas*. Kaunas, 1940.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the outbreak of civil war in Russia produced a huge wave of political refugees, sometimes known as the White Russian Emigration. The exodus included a large segment of the country's cultural elite who had refused to accept the rise of the communist regime.

Marc Chagall, like many other future refugees, was aided in his effort to leave Russia in 1922 by the poet and diplomat Jurgis Baltrušaitis, then head of a special Lithuanian mission in Moscow. Baltrušaitis also organized the transportation of Chagall's works to Kaunas via diplomatic mail.⁷¹

Already waiting to greet Chagall in Kaunas was the writer Israel Isidor Elyashev, with whom the artist had become acquainted when both men lived in Russia. Chagall only spent a few days in Kaunas and continued on to Berlin. Despite the brevity of Chagall's stay, Elyashev organized an exhibition of his work in Kaunas, held at the Lithuanian Artists' Society building (11 Maironio Street today) on May 13–14, 1922.⁷² The exhibition included more than sixty paintings. At the show's opening, Chagall delivered a lecture about his life and work, speaking in front of such a large audience that there was no room left to sit or stand.⁷³

The painter and graphic artist Jacob Messenblum (Jacques Missene) had studied at the Vilnius School of the Arts. After moving to Kaunas, he taught drawing at two Jewish secondary schools. One of Messenblum's students was Neemija Arbit Blatas.⁷⁴ Messenblum was among the most active Jewish artists participating in the cultural life of Lithuania. In 1921 and 1923, he took part in exhibitions organized by the Lithuanian Artists' Society and held two solo shows of his work. But Messenblum did not win wider recognition for his work while living in Kaunas. This is what one critic, writing under the name Spector, observed about Messenblum's 1923 exhibition:

This is the fourth Jewish artist to hold an exhibition of his work in Lithuania. And what is remarkable is that visitors to each of these exhibitions have had the chance to experience the manifestation of

the Jewish national spirit. That spirit emanates from each painting so clearly, it seems as if it comes not from one person but is rather the testament of an entire people about the present day, about their innate difference and their great calling. This spirit of a national calling still endures among the Jews. The Jews do not lose their sense of nationality, as evidenced by the works of their artists. The exhibition of the memorable works by Marc Chagall in Kaunas is one of the most prominent examples. Jewish society received him with the greatest interest and regard. And he truly merited this, since, as an artist, Chagall is the truest of Jews, not only in the narratives of his paintings but, perhaps more importantly, in his form of expression and in his style. Messenblum's painting exhibition attracted little interest. Why do the Jews have that bad habit of valuing wealth and fame more than the very essence of something? Chagall is famous, so everyone is interested in Chagall. They not only want his paintings, but they want to see him, too. No one knows of Messenblum, so Messenblum's exhibition, even if it was the better known, was of little interest to anyone. To reach Kaunas one has to pass through St. Petersburg, Berlin, Paris – and only then will one be properly (and perhaps excessively) loved and respected. . . . In the words of Jakštas, Messenblum is an artist "par excellence", but he is only a Kaunas artist, so his exhibition was barely noticed.

Spector. Messenblum's Painting Exhibition. *Gairės*, 1923⁷⁵

Messenblum left for Paris in 1924, where he took the name Jacques Missene.⁷⁶ He was soon noticed by art critics in Paris and began to participate in the most important art exhibitions, including at Versailles, "where only the most famous modern artists take part."⁷⁷ His works were later acquired by various museums in Europe and the United States. In 1932, he returned to Lithuania "full of vigor and artistic ideas" but died in 1933.⁷⁸ He is buried at the Old Jewish Cemetery in Žaliakalnis, Kaunas.

After his death, Missene's creative legacy attracted even greater attention and his work was displayed in Lithuanian art exhibitions abroad and at commemorative events. A posthumous exhibition of Missene's work opened in the former Oaza Cinema (now Laisvės Alėja 42) in 1934 and received considerable attention from viewers and critics alike.

71 Sidney Alexander. *Marc Chagall: A Biography*. New York: Putnam, 1978, 241.

72 Susan P. Compton. *Marc Chagall: My Life, My Dream. Berlin and Paris, 1922–1940*. Munich: Prestel, 1990, 261.

73 V. Bičiūnas. Marko Šagalo parodos ir paskaitos įspūdžiai. *Lietuva*, 1922 m. gegužės 25 d., 5.

74 Vaida Sikorskaitė. Jakubo Messenbliumo kūryba kaip litvakų tautinės savimonės reiškinys. *Lietuvos žydų kultūros paveldas: kasdienybės pasaulis*. Ed. Antanas Andrijauskas, Vilnius, 2013, 366.

75 Spector. Mesenbliumo Paveikslų Paroda. *Gairės*, 1923 m., nr. 4, 242–243.

76 Vaida Sikorskaitė. Jakubo Messenbliumo kūryba, 375.

77 Jokūbas Mesenbliumas ir jo kūryba. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1934 m. balandžio 23 d., 5.

78 Ibid.



Esther Lurie. *View of Kaunas*. c. 1939–1940. Depicting the Jonas Vailokaitis building (since demolished) on Vieniybės Square. Reproduction held by the Kaunas 9th Fort Museum.

Messenblum became famous not only in his native land but throughout the art world, where he has held several exhibitions of his work. On the occasion of this exhibition's opening, lengthy remarks about Messenblum and his work were given by Professor Šlapelis, director of the School of the Arts, and others. The exhibition has also been visited by foreign diplomats.

The Messenblum Art Exhibition. *Sekmadienis*, 1934⁷⁹

79 Mesenbliumo meno paroda. *Sekmadienis*. 1934 m. balandžio 23 d., 9.

World-renowned artist Ben Shahn (Benjamin Shahn) was born in Kaunas in 1898⁸⁰ and later became perhaps the most prominent Jewish artist from Kaunas.

Shahn only lived in his native city for the first four years of his life. One of his few and fondest memories from the city is of "eating ice cream in Kaunas for the first and only time

80 Kauno miesto žydų bendruomenės 1898 m. gimimų metrikų knyga. LVIA, f. 1226, ap. 1, b. 1996, įrašas M160.

before moving to America”, where he arrived with his family in 1906.⁸¹

Shahn studied at the National Academy of Design in New York. His art, representative of the Social Realism movement, sought to portray the shortcomings of the prevailing social order. Shahn is also well known for his photography. His works are held by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, the Vatican Museum, and various other galleries and private collections around the world.

Another world-famous artist with perhaps a much stronger connection to Kaunas was Neemija Arbit Blatas.

Painter Neemija Arbit Blatas (born Nicolai Arbitblatas) grew up in Kaunas and his work was well received by the founder of the Kaunas School of the Arts, painter Justinas Vienožinskis. In his review of an exhibition of works by Lithuania’s artists organized in the spring of 1927, Vienožinskis wrote:

With his portrayal of an Old Jew, Arbitblatas showed that this young artist is following the right path into the world of art. Young, vibrant, and full of energy, he is not afraid of looking boldly at nature and doesn’t concern himself with pleasing anyone. He conveys great expression in his portrait, and the wave of gray tones in the entire work is soft and rhythmic.

Justinas Vienožinskis. Lithuanian Art Exhibition 1927.
Pradai ir žygiai, 1927⁸²

In the autumn of 1932, Arbit Blatas opened the first private Art Gallery in Kaunas at No. 36 Gedimino Street (today Gedimino Street 40), which remained opened until the spring of 1933. The gallery exhibited art from Lithuania as well as France, Germany, Japan, Latvia, and the United States. Over a brief period of time, the gallery held many very well-received exhibitions. A review in December 1932 read:

The (Arbit Blatas) Art Salon . . . continues to show an exhibition of Japanese prints with more than 30 Japanese etchings. The exhibition’s originality is still attracting many visitors. The show has been

seen by individuals as well as school groups, university students, etc. Due to the success of the Japanese print exhibition, the show has been extended to December 12.

An Exhibition by American Artists Will Follow
the Japanese Show. *Dienos naujienos*, 1932⁸³

Arbit Blatas opened an exhibition of his own work in March, 1933.

Although this will be Arbitblatas’ fourth public show in Kaunas (he was only 16 when he took part in an exhibition by the Lithuanian Art Society), he is still a very welcome guest, because Mr. Arbitblatas is still a young man (barely 24) and every new work is a new stride toward progress. For that reason alone, his exhibition will likely be well attended.

Dienos naujienos, 1933⁸⁴

Having studied in Berlin, Dresden, and Paris, Neemija Arbit Blatas became the youngest member of the renowned “Paris School” and created portraits of the most famous artists of the day, including Pablo Picasso, Chaïm Soutine, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and others. He held regular exhibitions at the most important Parisian art galleries and his works were acquired by numerous French museums. Arbit Blatas moved to New York in 1940 and worked for many years in theatre, designing sets and costumes. He also designed several monuments to commemorate victims of the Holocaust and was awarded honorary medals and orders from various cities. Arbit Blatas died in New York in 1999. After his death, his family donated his works of art and sculpture to Lithuania.

81 Howard Greenfeld. *Ben Shahn: An Artist’s Life*. New York: Random House, 1998, 5.

82 J. Vienožinskis. Lietuvių meno parodos 1927 m. *Pradai ir žygiai*, 1927 m., nr. 2, 191.

83 Po Japonų parodos bus amerikiečių menininkų paroda. *Dienos naujienos*, 1932 m. gruodžio 2 d., 2.

84 *Dienos naujienos*, 1933 m. kovo 18 d., 3

CARICATURISTS

As graduates of the Kaunas School of the Arts began publishing their work in the press in the late 1920s, the quality of satirical drawings and caricatures began to improve. One of the most prolific Lithuanian Jewish caricaturists in the interwar period was Max L. Ginsburg. His caricatures and satirical drawings were published in all of the main newspapers and magazines of the day, including *Diena*, *Dienos naujienos*, *Sekmadienis*, *Tritinitas*, and *Vapsva*.⁸⁵

Beginning in 1929, Ginsburg also began showing his work in art exhibitions. His solo exhibition in 1933 was well attended and reviewed as “something entirely new for us – something never seen before.”⁸⁶ A leading newspaper presented Ginsburg thus:

He is a child of Lithuania. . . . He’s only studied at the Kaunas School of the Arts and he’s never been abroad, which is why audiences are so surprised. Ginsburg presents not only as a very mature artist, but also as a very original, spontaneous, keen-eyed, and able to create wonderful compositions. He is particularly strong in his satirical work. He has produced artistic satire that very accurately reflects the personal traits he observes, successfully choosing and adapting the most appropriate forms to express them. His satire is truly something to behold. In his watercolors, he is graceful, impressive, and gentle.

Art Exhibitions. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1933⁸⁷

Events taking place in the art world and public life of Kaunas were also portrayed in works by Lazar Kagan, who created good-natured satirical portrayals of artists, politicians, and public figures and caricatures on topical economic, political, and cultural issues. Kagan’s work first appeared in the press in 1932. He opened his first exhibition that same year. His satire exhibition later traveled to Estonia, Latvia, and Denmark. While working in Denmark in 1939–1940, Kagan published an album of one hundred satirical drawings of the most famous public figures in Scandinavia.⁸⁸

85 Vilma Gradinskaitė. Novatoriška Makso Ginsburgo karikatūra tarpukario Lietuvoje. *Rytai – Vakarai: komparatyvistinės studijos*, t. 12. Vilnius, 2012, 511.

86 Ibid.

87 Meno darbų parodose. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1933 m. kovo 20 d., 6.

88 Kauno dailininkų žydų kūryba ir likimas. Ed. Irina Nikitina, Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2007, 10–12.



Lazar Kagan. Portrait of Stasys Stašys, Director of the State Comptroller's General Audit Department. 1936. NČDM



Photo studio and shop owned by Ilya Yasvain. Laisvės Alėja 15 and 18 (now Nos. 25 and 32), Kaunas. 1920s. Antanas Burkus Collection

PHOTOGRAPHERS

The first photo studios opened in Kaunas in the 1860s. One of the city's first photographers was Itzik Klivansky, who was later joined by Shimel Bucher, Aharon Purelevich, and others.⁸⁹

Opening his shop in Kaunas in 1918, Shimon Bayer advertised that he could “create photographs for passports and certificates in ten minutes.”⁹⁰ But Bayer didn't limit himself to working in the studio. He also became a photo correspondent and collaborated with such newspapers as *Diena*, *Dienos naujienos*, *Sekmdienis*, and others.

The photographer Meyer Smechechaskas also actively worked with the press, primarily capturing official life in the provisional

capital: government work and meetings, receptions, as well as cultural events, from the theatre to media balls.⁹¹

As the number of photographers in the arts and business increased in the 1920s, Lithuanian, Jewish, and other photographers in Kaunas established the Lithuanian Society of Professional Photographers in 1926. The society's founders included: Shimon Bayer, M. Smechechaskas, Hirsh Vinokur, Moses Aron, and Israel Besarabia.⁹² The society's offices were located in Shimon Bayer's photo studio, located at what is today No. 82 Laisvės Alėja.

89 Dainius Junevičius. Kauno gubernijos fotografai XIX amžiuje. *Menotyra*, 1997, nr. 1, 61–63.

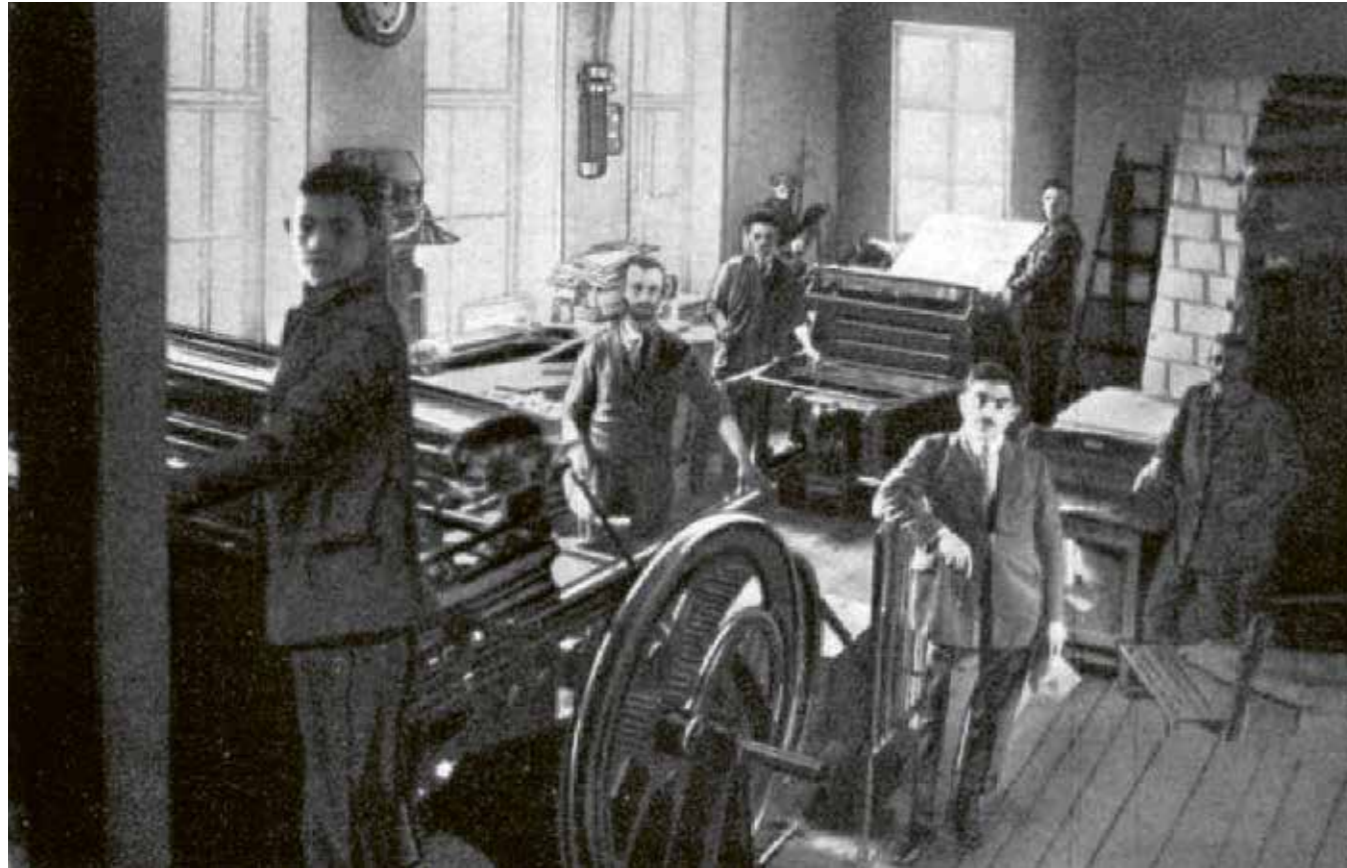
90 Reklama. *Lietuvos prekybos ir pramonės įstaigų adresų knyga 1928 m.*, 277.

91 Alvydas Surblys. Tarpukario Kauno fotografų veiklos fragmentai. <https://knyga.kvb.lt/lt/parodos/temines-leidiniu-parodos/item/158-tarpukario-kauno-fotografu-veiklos-fragmentai>

92 Ibid.



Simon Bayer Photo Studio. Corner of Laisvės Alėja and Maironio Street, Kaunas. 1920s. Antanas Burkus Collection



Shevel Levi printing press in Kaunas. Early 1920s. J. Etingerys, M. Liutermoza. *Lietuvos pramonė*. Kaunas, 1923

PRINTING HOUSES

Two printing houses opened in Kaunas in 1843, one state-owned and another private, owned by Moses Zimelovich-Tipograf. Tipograf's private printing house was purchased by Shimel Sokolovsky in 1862 and it eventually became one of the city's largest commercial printing enterprises and also one of the most important printers of books and periodicals.⁹³

Faivush Lipschitz opened the first lithographic printing house in Kaunas in 1866. His company printed Kaunas Governorate and city

maps, art posters, and certificates. During the First World War, it also printed currency for the German-established Oberost territory.⁹⁴

Prior to 1918, Jews in Kaunas had established twenty-six printing and lithography shops. Some operated only for a brief period, others continued in business until the Second World War. Inter-war Kaunas had twenty-five printing houses, including cardboard manufacturers.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁹⁵ Vilius Kavaliauskas. *Pažadėtoji žemė – Lietuva: Lietuvos žydai kuriant valstybę 1918–1940 m.* Vilnius, 2013, 61.

⁹³ Nijolė Lietuvninkaitė. *Kauno senoji knyga: raiška ir plėtotė 1843–1918 metais.* Kaunas, 2006, 64–68.



The former Gershon Gutman bookshop. Birštono Street, Kaunas. 1944. LCVA

BOOKSTORES

The first companies to open permanent shops for the sale of books and periodicals in Kaunas were established immediately after the city became an administrative governorate center. New arrivals and local merchants actively joined in the new business. Arriving in Kaunas from Białystok in 1844, Shaya Bialostosky opened the city's first book kiosk, followed in 1852 by another kiosk owned by the local merchant Samuel Gotkevich. In 1860, the merchant Solomon Gabrielovich opened the city's first proper bookstore. As demand for books increased, dedicated locations for book sales were established around the city. In 1866, Zundel Sladin and Moses Rozenzweig opened book kiosks selling Jewish religious publications. Jewish publications were also sold by the

bookstore established in 1876 by Isaac Gurvich which continued in business until the First World War.⁹⁶

Between the 1840s and 1870s, sixteen book kiosks and shops were opened in Kaunas, selling mostly collections of French, Russian, German, and Jewish literature.⁹⁷ The number of kiosks and shops selling Jewish publications in Kaunas began to grow after 1904, but most only stayed in business until the First World War.

⁹⁶ Nijolė Lietuvninkaitė. *Kauno senoji knyga*, 102–105.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 107.

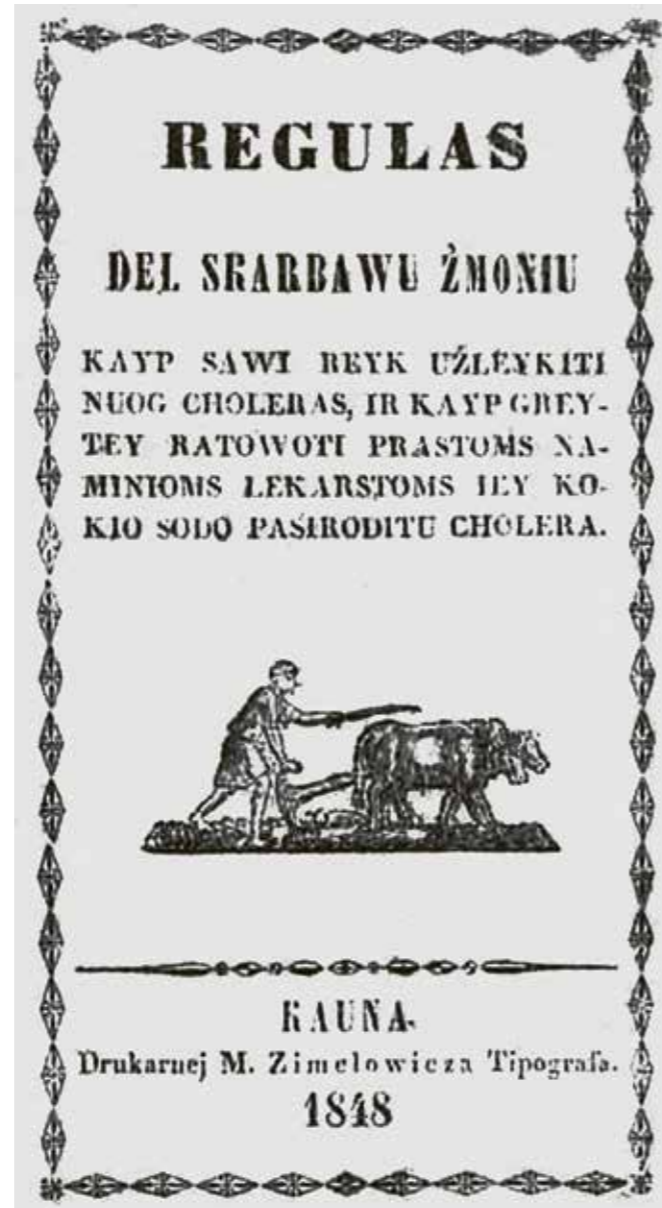
As they expanded their offerings, some book kiosks were turned into full shops, such as Lasar Faivel Ptashke's kiosk, which became one of the most popular private bookstores in Kaunas.

Ptashke's bookstore was taken over by his son Abraham in 1896. Expelled from Kaunas in 1915, Ptashke returned to the city in 1919 and resumed business at his bookstore at Prezidento Street 6 (now Vilnius Street 35).⁹⁸ Both Abraham Ptashke and his son Samuel, who later took over running the bookstore, conducted business in both book sales and printing. During the interwar period, their bookstore published books on various subjects and in different genres: geography guides, Lithuanian, German, Russian, and German language textbooks, accounting, historic literature, popular science, and works of fiction for children and adults.⁹⁹

Books also began to be published in 1923 at the Pribačis (Priebatsch) Bookstore, last located at No. 48 Laisvės Alėja (today designated No. 72). This branch of the Wrocław-based Priebatsch family business in book and educational materials was opened in Kaunas by Max Holzman, who arrived in the city from Germany with his wife. Holzman eventually assumed ownership of the branch in 1926.

Holzman made his way to Kaunas during the First World War. After arriving, he quickly became acquainted with the city's intellectual and Jewish communities. This experience eventually left a profound impact on the fate of the Holzman family.

Max arrived in Kaunas, the city of his destiny, on November 16, 1916. His letters speak of the circumstances of his life, and from them we can see how studiously he tried to help our entire family after he settled there, buying hams and bacon, flour, peas, and eggs. But back then, Kaunas was under a very strict administration and there was considerable poverty. In the villages, however, it was still possible to obtain many items. But inner things were much more important to Max than anything superficial. He seemed to emerge anew here. He befriended many prominent young people, included the Orientalists Schroeder and Shropsdorf, and the Lithuanian Ozelis. He became involved in the Oberost literary club, which met at the officers' headquarters. He saw a new world in Kaunas. It was his first encounter



The cover of the first Lithuanian book printed in Kaunas. 1848

⁹⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁹ Laikinosios sostinės knygos, leidę knygas: lokalizacija, raida, knygos. <https://knyga.kvb.lt/lt/parodos/temines-leidiniu-parodos/item/159-knygai-leide-knygas>



An ad for the Pribačis Bookstore. OZE Health Calendar of 1934. Kaunas. 1933. LNMMB Judaica Collection

with the Jewish community, which lived within a closed realm of both spirit and soul, not wanting to go out into the freer world outside. He idealized that community and perceived it entirely differently than the officers' world around him. He was invited to Jewish celebrations and Friday evenings, and watched their plays, like David and Goliath, at the theatre. He was deeply impressed by the sincerity and hospitality of their families, by their spiritual devotion and how they learned and debated at the synagogue school. It was there that he learned that one's spirit could overcome all adversities. He lived in a small cozy house in Žaliakalnis, where an anti-aircraft battery was located. There was a fruit tree grove there in the Tsarist years. From there he had a wide view of the oak-lined Nemunas valley.

Margarete Holzman¹⁰⁰

The Pribačis Bookstore primarily sold German literature, but also published textbooks in various languages. The bookstore was also a gathering place for local intellectuals.

¹⁰⁰ Margarita Holcmanaitė, Kauno „Pribačio“ knygynas. *Naujasis Židinys – Aidai*, 1997, nr. 5–6, 244.

The Pribačis Bookstore and publishing house . . . opened in a beautiful space on the central portion of Laisvės Alėja. Large showcase windows displayed books in three Western European languages – German, French, and English – and always included excellent reproductions of famous paintings. I remember they had works on display there by Renoir, Van Gogh, Hans Thoma and other artists. . . . What was unusual was that, at the Pribačis Bookstore, instead of bored salespeople selling books from behind the counter, one could spend hours sitting at small tables and paging through interesting publications.

Margarete Holzman¹⁰¹

The Pribačis Bookstore was a gathering place, where refugees, locals, and Lithuanian intellectuals would congregate, and not just to buy a book. And they published books that had already been banned and removed from circulation in Germany, as well as many books on art...

From an interview with Fruma Kučinskienė, 2017¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 246.

¹⁰² Atminties biuras: F. Kučinskienė. Kaunas 2022.

After the start of the German occupation in 1941, Max Holzman and his eldest daughter Marija openly expressed their anger at Nazi brutality. Holzman soon disappeared without a trace and Marija was arrested and murdered at the Ninth Fort in July, 1941. Holzman's widow, Helene, and their younger daughter Margarita endured the experience and drew strength from it to help others, including Kaunas natives Fruma Vitkinaitė Kučinskienė, Julijana Zarchi, Rosian Bagriansky, and many others.¹⁰³ In 2005, Helene Holzman was inscribed in the list of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

Most other bookstores in the city also engaged in publishing. Established in 1923, the David Gutman Bookstore (on Donelaičio Street and Laisvės Alėja) published books and primarily sold law literature.

Yecheiel Levinas also had a bookstore selling works of fiction on Laisvės Alėja. Levinas was the father of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most prominent representatives of 20th century French moral philosophy. Levinas' philosophy had a profound impact on contemporary philosophical and theological thinking.

Levinas' family lived on what was then known as Kalėjimo Street (now Spaustuvininkų Street). During the First World War, the family fled the advancing front and moved to Kharkov, in present-day Ukraine. Later, after graduating secondary school in Kaunas, Levinas left to study philosophy at Strasbourg University in France, but he maintained his ties to Kaunas, spending summers there visiting his parents, brothers, relatives, and his future wife. Before moving permanently to France, Levinas published an article in Lithuanian entitled "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture" in a 1933 edition of the magazine *Vairas*. The Holocaust took the life of his father and brothers and only his cousin survived. Levinas himself spent World War II in a French prisoner of war camp in Germany, while his wife and daughter found shelter with nuns in Orleans, France.¹⁰⁴

| | | |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Eilės Nr. 85855 | Pavardė Levinas | Paso blanko Nr. |
| Gyvena- moji vieta: | Vardas Emmanuelas | Valsčius 1230210 |
| Gimimo diena arba amžius: | Kaimas (miestas) Kaunas | Gimimo vieta: Apskritis |
| Gimimo vieta: Apskritis | Valsčius | Kaimas Kaunas |
|  | Asmens žymės: | Ypačiosios žymės: |
| | Ūgis: | |
| | Plaukai: | |
| | Akys: | |
| | Veidas: | |
| Darbas | Mokymai | |
| Tautybė | Judaizmas | |
| Tikyba | | |
| E. Levinas (Parašas) | | |

Internal passport card belonging to Emmanuel Levinas. 1923. KRVA

¹⁰³ Šitas vaikas turi gyventi. Elenos Holzmanienės užrašai 1941–1944. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Viktoras Bachmetevas. Prancūzijos žydai iš Kauno. 2020. <https://istorijufestivalis.eu/istorijos/viktoras-bachmetjevas/>

LIBRARIES

Abba Balosher opened a bookstore in Kaunas in 1900. One year later, he established a commercial library next door, where visitors could find "many publications of universal content in Polish, Russian, English, French, and German."¹⁰⁵ Balosher's library eventually became one of the largest of its kind in Kaunas, second only to the university library. In the interwar years, the library was housed in the Jewish Bank building (now Laisvės Alėja 106).

One of the first public libraries in Kaunas opened in 1867 as part of the state-run Jewish school. Students could read books and periodicals free of charge, while members of the public could also access holdings for 3 kopeks per visit.¹⁰⁶ Libraries for teachers and students were also run by other Jewish schools in Kaunas.

Another Jewish commercial library and reading room was opened in 1908 by physicians Abba Lapin and David Schwartz, offering books on religion, science, and art. In 1911, the library was named after Abraham Mapu.¹⁰⁷

In 1940, the great majority of private bookstores and libraries were nationalized by the Soviet regime. Some of them continued to operate under different names. In October 1940, the Mapu Library was renamed the Lithuanian Communist Youth League Greifenbergeris Library and Reading Room.¹⁰⁸

After occupying Kaunas in 1941, the Nazis began to purge Jewish books from all publishing houses, libraries, and bookstores. In autumn of that year, lists were compiled of literature deemed detrimental to the Nazi regime. Most of the books selected from the former Balosher and other private libraries and synagogues in Kaunas were brought to one location. In early 1942, four Jews with knowledge of Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and German were selected from the Kaunas ghetto and were told to sort the confiscated books as either valuable or worthless. This task was undertaken by Chatzkel Lemchen, Abraham Kisin, Tzvi Kirsh, and Joseph Rizhin.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Nijolė Lietuvninkaitė. *Kauno senoji knyga: raiška ir plėtotė 1843–1918 metais*. Kaunas, 2006, 166.

¹⁰⁶ Отчет Ковенского губернатора за 1867 г.

¹⁰⁷ Nijolė Lietuvninkaitė. *Kauno senoji knyga*, 166.

¹⁰⁸ 1940 m. spalio 22 d. Lietuvos TSR Aukščiausiosios Tarybos Prezidiumo įsakas. LCVA, R-758, ap. 1, b. 42, l. 29.

¹⁰⁹ Arūnas Bubnys. A. Rosenbergo operatyvinio štabo veikla Lietuvoje: žydų kultūros vertybių grobimas ir naikinimas (1941–1944). *Lituanistica*, 2004, nr. 3, 38.



The Abba Balosher Library located on the ground floor of the Jewish Central Bank (now No. 106 Laisvės Alėja), Kaunas. 1920s–1930s. Antanas Burkus Collection

The most valuable publications were transported to Frankfurt am Main.

Books confiscated from Jews were burned or donated as waste to a paper factory in Petrašiūnai, outside Kaunas.¹¹⁰ Some of the publications were able to be saved. When the Nazis demanded the destruction of books and periodicals owned by Vytautas Magnus University Associate Professor Chaim N. Shapiro, who had been executed, the director of the university's library, Vaclovas Biržiška, and several students loaded trucks with clerical wastepaper in place of the doomed publications and sent the trucks to the Petrašiūnai paper factory. Biržiška was also able to rescue a nearly complete collection of Lithuanian Jewish periodicals published between 1922 and 1941.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 42.

THE PERIODIC PRESS

In the 19th century, Kaunas would only learn of world events one day later, after receiving newspapers published in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Warsaw, and Berlin. Same-day news could be read in the newspaper *Severozapadnoe slovo* (The Northwestern Word), published in Vilnius. The city's official newspaper, *Kovenskie gubernskie vedomosti* (Kaunas Governorate News) and its chronicle of local events was published twice a week.

In the late 19th century, attempts were made to promote more active media publication in Kaunas and find ways to diversify local press options in the city.

In 1901, the prominent Kaunas cultural and public figure Abba Balosher filed for permission to publish a daily newspaper titled *Kovensky Kurier* (The Kaunas Courier), but he was only issued a permit to print local chronicles and announcements.

In 1902, Balosher began publishing a four-page free newspaper entitled *Kovensky Spravochnik Listok* (Kaunas Informational Newsletter), which included advertisements, notices, and announcements about cultural events in Kaunas. Balosher later wrote about the periodical: "I published this caricature of a newspaper so as not to lose the right or the hope to expand my program in the future. . . . In 1904, I suspended the rag."¹¹² Balosher ended publication after Julius Blumental obtained permission in 1904 to publish the *Kovensky Telegraf* (The Kaunas Telegraph).

Recalling the appearance of that newspaper, Balosher wrote:

You could sense a better mood in the city. Kaunas seemed to take pride in suddenly being able to speak, having a voice, like others. It had outgrown its swaddling clothes and had suddenly become a member of the family of civilized cities. Foreign newspapers continued to be read, of course, but news started to come from our own press. The newspaper became an advocate against the government for people in the city and the provinces. Government officials read the newspaper to learn about the hardships of life in the city and countryside. The newspaper became a center for legal assistance. Delegates would arrive from the provinces, dressed in peasant coats as well as Jewish cloaks. The editor would receive



Waiting for merchants. Kaunas. 1937.

Photograph: Antanina Laucienė. *Galerija*, 1937, No. 1



A portion of a cover for the magazine *Kauno veidrodis*. 1910



A drawing illustrating the popular saying “to pour from an empty container into a leaky one”, depicting Julius Blumenthal, editor of the *Šiaurės Vakarų telegrafas* newspaper. *Kauno veidrodis*, 1910, No.2

Wolberg. At the time, the publication was called the only magazine of its kind “in the entire Northwestern Krai”.¹¹⁴

The Jewish press thrived in the interwar years. Between 1919 and 1936, Kaunas had fifteen dailies and thirty weekly publications,¹¹⁵ some of which, in truth, released only a handful of issues.

The interwar press was a window into the diversity of political and social life in Jewish Kaunas. Most of the publications were circulated by the city’s political parties and religious, cultural, and community organizations.

Most Zionist organizations had their own newspapers. The General Zionists’ Union published the daily *Di Yidishe Shtime* (The Yiddish Voice). The Zionist Socialist *Dos Vort* (The Word) ran from 1934 to 1940, and the Revisionist Zionists published *Unzer Moment* (Our Moment) from 1934 to 1937. Starting in 1930, *Di Yidishe Shtime* competed with the Folkist-leaning *Folksblat* (People’s Newspaper).

Orthodox Jews made several attempts to publish their own newspaper, beginning with the *Yidisher Lebn* (Jewish Life) in 1921, and later *Unzer Vort* (Our Word) and *Yidishe Velt* (Jewish World), among others.

Workers and artisans also had their own publications, including the weeklies *Arbeter Lebn* (Workers’ Life), *Di Naye Zait* (New Time), and *Der Balmelokhe* (The Artisan).

There were also purely informational and entertainment publications, such as *Morgn Kurier* (The Morning Courier) and *Funken* (Sparks).

The daily *Di Yidishe Shtime* held a particularly prominent position in the Jewish media. It was the only Jewish newspaper in Kaunas to run from 1919 to 1940. During this period, the newspaper served as the main source of news about events in Lithuania and the world. Despite its Zionist leanings, the paper embraced political flexibility and loyalty to the Lithuanian state.¹¹⁶ Reuven Rubinstein served as the publication’s editor for many years.

¹¹⁴ *Ковенское зеркало*, 1910, nr. 1.

¹¹⁵ Yudl Mark. *Yidishe peryodishe oysgabes in Lite. Zamlbukh likhvoyd dem tsvey hundred un fuftsikstn yoyvl fun der yidisher prese, 1686–1936*, red. Yankev Shatski. *Nyu York: Amopteyl fun yidishn visnshaftlekhn institut*, 1937, 250–298.

¹¹⁶ Larisa Lempertienė. *Tarpukario Lietuvos politinių ir socialinių aktualijų pateikimas žydų dienraštyje Di jidiše štime (Diyidische shtime). Abipusis pažinimas: lietuvių ir žydų kultūriniai saitai*. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2010, 234.

The 2000th edition of a newspaper is a significant event for any country and any nation. But for the first Yiddish newspaper in Lithuania, home to 150,000 Jews, the importance of this celebration is tenfold, bearing in mind the incredibly difficult, often unbearable conditions we have had to endure and experience. These have been days of struggle and tension, suffering and joy, victory and loss, rising and falling, faith and disappointment, light, and fighting for our ideals and achievements.

Di Yidishe Shtime, 1926¹¹⁷

At different times, *Di Yidishe Shtime* also published regular supplements in Yiddish as well as Lithuanian and Hebrew: *Hed Lita* (Echo of Lithuania) in Hebrew from 1923–1924, *Mūsų garsas* (Our Sound) in Lithuanian in 1924–1925, *Di Velt* (The World) in 1924–1925, and *Der Yidisher Kooperator* (The Jewish Cooperator) in 1925.

Leftist Jews published their own Yiddish newspaper *Nays* (The News) in 1921–1923 and in 1926. The newspaper was supported by prominent Jewish intellectuals who had fled the Soviet Union during the wave of the so-called White Russian Emigration and resided temporarily in Kaunas, including Alexander Mukdoni, Nachum Stif, Zelig Kalmanovich, and others.

Antizionist groups were able to establish their own regular daily in 1930, and the newspaper ran until 1940. It was conceived by Ozer Finkelstein, a representative of the Folkists, or People’s Party, and a member of the Jewish caucus in the Lithuanian parliament. The newspaper was edited for a period of time by the prominent Yiddishist and educator Yudl Mark. The publishers used the very first issue to voice their strong opposition to their competitor, *Di Yidishe Shtime*, and its promotion of Zionist ideals: the Hebraization of Lithuania’s Jews and fostering allegedly illusory hopes of settlement in Palestine.¹¹⁸ The editors instead called for the embrace of a modern Yiddish culture and devoting attention to the acute issues of the day.¹¹⁹

Most Jewish periodicals were published in Yiddish. Even the largest Zionist dailies chose Yiddish to reach the largest possible reading audience. Publications in Hebrew also circulated at different times, including *Galim* (Waves), *Bemishole hahinuch* (Educational Way), and *Hamedina* (The State).

¹¹⁷ *Di Yidishe Shtime*, 1926.05.18, nr. 113 (2000), 1.

¹¹⁸ *Unzere tsiln un vegn. Folksblat*, 1930.02.14, nr. 1, 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Reuven Rubinstein, editor of the daily *Di Yidishe Shtime*, Caricature by Lazar Kagan. *Sekmadienis*, 22 January 1933

The association of Jewish veterans of the Lithuanian Wars of Independence published their own Lithuanian-language weekly, *Apžvalga* (Review), from 1935 to 1940. Some Jewish authors also contributed to the local Russian-language press, including the aforementioned *Ponedelnik*, as well as *Volnaya Litva* (Free Lithuania), and *Ekho* (Echo), edited initially by Arcady Buchov and, after 1927, by Julius Blumental.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Pavel Lavrinec. *Žydų bendruomenė, lietuvių kultūra ir rusų spauda. Abipusis pažinimas*, 202–227.

them all, issue any necessary instructions and, very often, provide assistance.¹¹³

The newspaper was renamed *Severo-zapadny telegraf* (The Northwestern Telegraph) in 1907. Blumental also served as editor for the first issues of the political, social, and literary newspaper *Ponedelnik* (Monday), which ran from 1907 to 1908.

Media diversity increased in Kaunas in the early 20th century. Nine issues of the weekly satirical magazine *Kovensкое зеркало* (The Kaunas Mirror) were published in 1910, edited by V. A.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 5



WRITERS

One of Kaunas' most prominent Jewish writers of the 19th century, Abraham Mapu (1808–1867), is associated with the Haskalah (enlightenment) movement and early modern, secular Hebrew literature. In his writing, Mapu combined biblical Hebrew with contemporary European literary trends. Mapu became famous for his novels *Ahavat Zion* (Annou: Prince and Peasant, 1852), *Ashmat Shomron* (Guilt of Samaria, 1865, 1866), and *Ayit Tzavua* (The Hypocrite, 1858, 1861, 1864). Nearly one hundred and fifty years after its first appearance, excerpts of Mapu's first novel were published in Lithuania in 1997 as part of an anthology of Jewish prose entitled *Šiaurės gėlės* (Northern Flowers), compiled by Emanuelis Zingeris.

The night stars fade in the light of a pale pink morning. The mornings blaze with fire... Silver, mirrorlike rivers and streams still flow calmly within their banks. The green of the hills and the redness of dawn blend along the surface into a beautiful flurry of colors; the blue sky and silver stars reflecting down from above. The birds

soon awaken and begin to chirp. Their song fills everything around, as if the mountains of Zion themselves were singing. The sky, the earth, and all of nature glorifies and worships the Creator of the Heavens.

Abraham Mapu, *The Love of Zion*¹²¹

In the interwar years, Mapu became a symbol of Jewish Kaunas. In 1919, a street in Old Town was named in his honor. The street name was changed under the Soviets in 1948 and restored in 1989. In 1933, the founders of the Abraham Mapu Library, the physicians A. Lapin and D. Schwartz, and like-minded associates Abba Balosher, Chaim N. Shapiro, and other prominent Jews established the Abraham Mapu Jewish Society to promote the Hebrew language and culture.¹²²

121 Cituota iš N. Šapira. *Kaunietis A. Mapu: jo gyvenimas ir kūryba*, Kaunas, 1928, 75.

122 Žydu A. Mapu vardu draugijos įstatai. LCVA, f. 402, ap. 4, b. 724, l. 3.



A stamp honouring Abraham Mapu. Israel. 1968

In his book *Kaunietis A. Mapu: jo gyvenimas ir kūryba* (The Life and Work of Abraham Mapu of Kaunas), published in 1928, Chaim N. Shapiro wrote: "One just has to replace the name Zion in this image with Kaunas or Aleksotas to obtain a true picture of a morning in Kaunas or along the Nemunas. The Neris and its confluence with the Nemunas is interwoven into the image. It becomes clear why Mapu wrote: 'Rivers and streams still flow calmly.'"¹²³

123 N. Šapira. *Kaunietis A. Mapu: jo gyvenimas ir kūryba*. Kaunas, 1928, 75.



A statue of Abraham Mapu (by Martynas Gaubas, 2018). A. Mapu Street, Kaunas. Photograph: Romualdas Požerskis

Eliezer Heiman's historic tale *Avrom Mapu* appeared in Yiddish in 1937, devoted not only to Mapu's literary portrait, but also to a broader portrayal of the Jewish cultural world of the 19th century.¹²⁴ The work was translated into Lithuanian in 1997 by Tsvi Smoliakov.

124 Justina Petruilionytė. *Miestas literatūroje: Kauno reprezentavimo strategijos šiuolaikinėje lietuvių prozoje*. Doktoro disertacija. Kaunas, 2017, 49.



Where A. Mapu liked to write – a gazebo on Aleksotas Hill in Kaunas. 1919–1920. LAM

The great basilica bell swung above the city as night approached. Flocks of crows wintering in the high tower, frightened by the pealing bell, scattered screeching through Jewish streets snaking along the narrow peninsula between the Nemunas and Neris toward the old castle with its eternally flung open gates, every one of its stones tenfold heavier beneath the burdens of centuries past...

The flock of crows flew wide circles above the steep, snow-covered roof of the Mapu house, calling out constantly. The sounds of the bell who visit his flat every evening, slipping in through the crooked

ceiling, through the thick walls and the narrow-arched windows whose frames imprisoned the white hills of Aleksotas. Restless sounds filled copper pots, clay fruit bowls, and a chest of drawers, four shelves high. They floated through the dark rooms like howling beasts. ... Abraham Mapu took a few steps forward and stopped. A sad musing fluttered across his brow that rose like a gleaming tower above his long, dark face. He lifted his lengthy black beard (which had grown in step with the pile of manuscripts over decades of work on his novels *The Love of Zion*, *Guilt of Samaria*, and *Seeing Visions*) as if to make sure that the sounds of the bell had not

entangled themselves in the thickness of his hair. He stopped by an open bookcase set into the wall, full of Holy Books in Hebrew, Latin, German, and French, and stood there, hunched over from doubt and vexing thoughts, like a traveler pausing by the gates of some ancient, miraculous city...¹²⁵

Heiman's story also describes Mapu's beloved pergola on the slopes of Aleksotas Hill, a place mentioned in nearly every Yiddish text about Kaunas and which is still referred to by some as "Mapu's veranda" or Mapu's cabin, even though the structure no longer exists.

Poetry written in Kaunas in Yiddish and Hebrew began reaching the outside world in the 1850s–1860s. In 1861–1865, the Hebrew-language weekly *Hamagid* (The Preacher), printed in Prussia, published several poems by Iser Bera, son of Rafael Volf.¹²⁶ That was the penname used by the author, who also included the location Kovno (Kaunas) next to his name. These romantic poems exhibited a love for Jerusalem and explored matters of religion. But I. B. Volf would later become best known not for his poetry, but as the owner of a prominent brewery.

The career of Eliakum Zunsler, who moved from Vilnius to Kaunas in 1857 in search of a better life, took a slightly different path. First finding work as a tailor in Kaunas, Zunsler soon became interested in the Mussar movement and the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter, who influenced the work of the future renowned poet and bard. The poems Zunsler wrote in Kaunas are imbued with moral emotions.¹²⁷ He not only wrote verse, he also composed accompanying music, turning his poems into songs which he performed himself. In his autobiography, Zunsler refers to his years in Kaunas as his "golden age":

*All of Kaunas talked about a young tailor who wrote such wonderful songs, and nearly every evening I was invited to one gathering or another. Crowds of people would surround the homes where I performed my songs and would listen until they learned them by heart. I soon noticed that singing paid a higher return than sewing, for which I could never hope to receive more than three rubles a week. So, I decided to abandon that trade.*¹²⁸

125 Eliezeris Heimanas. Abraomas Mapu. (vert. Smoliakovas C.) *Šiaurės gėlės: Lietuvos žydų prozos antologija*. Ed. Emanuelis Zingeris, Vilnius: Vaga, 1997, 231–232.

126 *Hamagid*, 1861.07.17, 5; 1863.04.15, 5; 1865.07.19, 5.

127 Solomon Liptzin. *Eliakum Zunsler, Poet of His People*. Behrman House, 1950, 77.

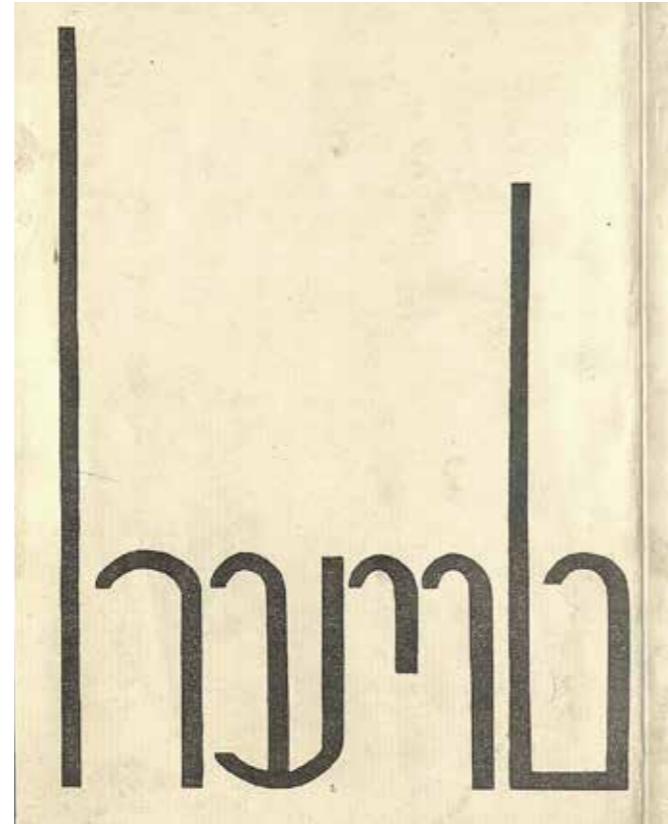
128 *A Jewish Bard: Being the Biography of Eliakum Zunsler / written by himself and rendered into English by Simon Hirsdansky*. New York, 1905, 22–23.



Eliakum Zunsler. J. Epstein, 1902. Hutchins Hapgood. *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York*. New York and London, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1902



The cover of *Unter der Zun*, a book by D.V. Meyerovich. Kaunas. 1935



A cover for the literary anthology *Toyern*. Kaunas. 1937

As his fame grew, Zunser returned several years later to Vilnius, where in 1861 he published a small book of Yiddish poetry entitled *Shirim Chadashim* (New Melodies), including poems he had written while in Kaunas, such as *Der Zeyger* (The Clock), *Der Prom* (The Ferry), *Der Zumer und der Vinter* (Summer and Winter), and others.¹²⁹ Zunser returned to Kaunas in 1888 to present his work. It was said that his less affluent fans complained they couldn't afford tickets to see their beloved poet, so the evening event was repeated.¹³⁰

Zunser was forced to emigrate to New York in 1889, where the print shop he established in his home became a gathering place

for Yiddish poets and young Zionists. In 1905, *The New York Times* named Eliakum Zunser "the father of Yiddish poetry."¹³¹

The Jewish secular literary tradition born in Kaunas in the mid-19th century was continued by a new generation of writers more than fifty years later:

*We want to be free, forever young and strong like the sea.
Spirited and fierce like a storm.
The roaring, foaming, murmuring around us...
We are on an island.*¹³²

¹³¹ East Side Honors Poet of its Masses; Cooper Union Throng Cheers Eliakum Zunser. *New York Times*, March 31, 1905, 7.

¹³² Di Vispe. *Vispe*, nr. 1. Kovne: Yiddish, 1921, 2.

¹²⁹ Solomon Liptzin. *Eliakum Zunser*, 71.

¹³⁰ Ibid.



The cover of Lea Goldberg's book *From My Old Home*. Sifriat Poalim. 1944

So declared a manifesto printed in the first modernist Yiddish literary journal *Vispe* (Islet) published in Kaunas in 1921. And indeed, the authors of Yiddish modernism seemed to move to the newly proclaimed provisional capital like to an undiscovered island.

Kalmen Zingman (1889–1929), the publisher and editor of *Vispe*, returned to Kaunas from Kharkov, where he had lived after the 1915 expulsion of the Jews, and began to organize emerging Yiddish writers. Eight editions of *Vispe* were released between 1921 and 1923. The texts published in the journal explored such subjects as the violence of war, liberation from shtetl traditions, generational conflict, living in larger cities, and the promise of a "new start".

Vispe established a foundation for the emergence of later Yiddish literature written in interwar Kaunas. The pages of *Vispe* included works by such authors as Zingman, Hirsch Bloshteyn, Joseph Gotfardstein, Pesach Markus, Judith (Yudika) Tsik, Roza Gutman, David Grinshpan, Leib Glitsman, Mordecai Yoffe, Aron Goldblat, and David Kahan.

Mir Alein (We Alone), a Yiddish literary association for a new generation, was established in 1926. The group's first poetry evening and concert was held on September 19 of that year at the Gordonas Club, at Daukšos Street 28, with opening remarks by the editor of *Di Yidische Shtime*, Reuven Rubinstein.¹³³ The group's writers presented their work and Nosen Grinblat delivered a lecture on "The Young Yiddish Poetry of Lithuania."¹³⁴ Authors published in the *Mir Alein* journal, such as Jacob and Noah Yitzhak Gottlieb, Eliezer Heiman, and David Fram, devoted considerable attention in their work to Lithuania's nature and the daily lives of Lithuanian peasants. Dovid Umru, Jacob Josade, Chaim Yellin, and Israel Kaplan explored subjects such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment. The journal also published works by women authors, including Sore Aizen, Leah Grinstein-Kaplan, and Leah Rudnitzka.

The Hebrew-language journal *Petach* (Threshold) began publication only in 1932, and in 1933 its authors released what was likely the only collection of modernist Hebrew literature at the time, entitled *Paam* (Step).

The Yiddish and Hebrew literary circles in Kaunas did not exist as separate worlds. To a certain extent, authors such as Heiman, Jacob Gottlieb, and Arje Glazman, who had published their work in Yiddish almanacs, also wrote in the previously mentioned Hebrew publications.

But new names emerged as well, including one of the most prominent new authors, Lea Goldberg (Lija Goldbergaitė, 1911–1970), who went on to become a renowned Israeli writer and literary critic.

Goldberg spent her childhood and youth in Kaunas. She attended the Moshe Schwabe Hebrew Gymnasium and was admitted to study at the university. Goldberg left for Palestine in 1935 and joined a literary group led by Abraham Shlonsky, with whom the Kaunas publication *Petach* maintained regular contact. In his

¹³³ *Di Yidische Shtime*, 1926.09.16, 8.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 208.



Lea Goldberg. Kaunas. Early 1930s. LCVA

In Israel, Goldberg came to represent a new generation of poets writing during the creation of the new country and its first years of existence. This generation reflected on the face and landscape of the land of their birth and the heroic images of their homeland, as well as their memories from “there” and their desire to establish themselves “here”, or, as Goldberg herself wrote, “the pain of two homelands”.¹³⁶ The theme of memory was particularly important in Goldberg’s work.

My memory is clear as a spring
in which—everything shatters.
Your name and face are shards.

Your name and beautiful face:
how did they survive in the well?
Don’t say:
In the well, they were whole
and now they’re scattered in the wind.

They’re scattered in the wind today,
they fall into the river’s expanse,
and all rivers flow into the sea,
though the sea is never full.¹³⁷

Music was composed for many of Goldberg’s poems and became a part of the Israeli nation, passed on from one generation to the next.

Goldberg wrote about Kaunas and Lithuania elsewhere, not just in her poetry. In her novel *Vehu Haor* (And This Is the Light), published in Hebrew in 1946, we find not only many autobiographical details of Goldberg’s life, but also the familiar face of Kaunas. The novel is set in the summer of 1931, when twenty-year-old Nora returns to her native city from her university studies in Berlin:

The new post office, like all the new government buildings in that small state, was a little more splendid than it had to be. And even though it didn’t go beyond bourgeois taste, something in it bordered on the absurd, because of the search for a “special style” that had the pretense of coordinating the demands of modern man in a technical

¹³⁶ Izraelio ambasada Lietuvai. Literatūra. <https://embassies.gov.il/riaga-li/AboutIsrael/Culture/Pages/CULTURE-Literature.aspx>

¹³⁷ Lėja Goldberg. Užmiršimas. Iš hebrajų kalbos vertė J. Kėkštas. *Aidai*, 1971 m. balandžio 4 d. http://www.aidai.eu/index.php?view=article&catid=37%3A7104&id=561%3Ai-hebraj-poezijos-l-goldberg-ir-j-amihai-vert-j-kktas&option=com_content&Itemid=107

1938 review of Goldberg’s poetry, Jewish literary historian Chaim Nachman Shapiro wrote:

*Lija Goldbergaitė is an extremely talented poet. She is noted for her exceptional subtlety, gentle dreaminess and a very distinctly melodic soul. A collection of her highly adventurous poems has been released in a small book titled Tabot Ashan (Smoke Rings). The book was very well received and brought her considerable recognition.*¹³⁵

¹³⁵ N. Šapira. *Naujosios žydų literatūros metmenys*. Kaunas, 1938, 126.



Lea Goldberg’s image on the reverse of a 100 shekel banknote, Israel. 2017 series

*age with big, vaulted Venetian windows and pink marble columns like both Renaissance and ancient buildings. The milk chocolate brown of the outside walls calmed the eye of the spectator, but inside the building, expensive marble piled up, too much marble.*¹³⁸

Goldberg also wrote for children. Many generations of Israelis have grown up with her books, which have become classics of Hebrew children’s literature. Perhaps the best known is *Dira Lehaskir* (A Flat for Rent). In 1970, Goldberg was posthumously awarded Israel’s most prestigious literary prize.

A song based on Lea Goldberg’s poem *Mishirei Eretz Ahavati* (From the Songs of My Beloved Land) was composed for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Israel’s founding in 2018. In part of the poem, Goldberg speaks of the land of her birth, Lithuania:

My homeland – land of beauty and poverty.
The queen has no home, the king has no crown.
There are seven spring days in the year
And cold and rain all the rest.

¹³⁸ Lea Goldberg. *And This Is the Light*. Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara Harshav. The Toby Press, 2011, 94.

But for seven days the roses bloom,
And for seven days the dew drops shine,
And for seven days, windows are open.
And all your poor folk stand in the street
And lift their pale faces toward the good light,
And all your poor folk are happy.¹³⁹

Emigration and the Holocaust scattered and extinguished the young Jewish writers of interwar Kaunas. The phenomenon that was the emerging body of Kaunas literature was destroyed.

In the late 20th century, one of the founders of Lithuanian Jewish literature was Markas Zingeris (b. 1947), whose books *Aplink fontaną, arba Mažasis Paryžius* (Around the Fountain, or Little Paris, 1995), *Iliuzionas* (Illusion, 2000), *Grojimas dviese* (Playing Duo, 2002), and other works explored the memory of the Jews of Kaunas.

¹³⁹ Lea Goldberg. Excerpt from the poem “From the Songs of My Beloved Country” (transl. Danny Kolker). <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/?song=mishirei-eretzhavati>

JEWIS IN KAUNAS DURING WORLD WAR II



HARBINGERS OF WAR: PROTESTING THE NAZI REGIME

The rise of the National Socialist Party and its assumption of government control of Germany in 1933 affected the life of Jews in other countries as well. Protests began in the spring of 1933 in the United States against the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany. That wave of protests eventually also reached Kaunas.

The events of the spring of 1933 in Kaunas were summarized in a report prepared by the Political Department at the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

The agitation of Jews around the world about Hitler's regime and the suppression of Jews has also affected Lithuania's Jews. The cry carried by the Jewish press in England, France, and America – war

against the swastika and Hitler – has been picked up by the Lithuanian Jewish press as well. Although action in Jewish society was initially limited to protest demonstrations and strongly worded resolutions, it later evolved into a form of boycott of German goods, schools, and films.¹

Jewish protests in Kaunas began with a demonstration organized at the Choral Synagogue, in which Jews from all groups in the community were represented. The protest inspired a boycott against everything German. The *Folksblat* daily wrote:

¹ Vokiškų prekių, filmų ir mokyklų boikoto akcija Lietuvos žydų spaudoje. LCVA, f. 383, ap. 7, b. 1427, l. 19.



Photographs of Kaunas during the Second World War. Private collection

The world's conscience shall not rest so long as law, culture, and humanity are being trampled in the center of Europe. . . . By protesting not against the German culture or the German people, but only against Hitler, his program, and his blood-stained regime, the Jews of Kaunas have come together with Jews around the world as a force, and even Hitler will not be able to fight against the public opinion of the entire world. This understanding strengthens and encourages Lithuania's Jews to protest even more loudly. . . . The Jews of Kaunas are proud of their demonstration, the closing of stores, and the impression created by a powerful wave of protest that has swept the city.²

² Ibid.

Jewish-owned stores in Kaunas boycotted imported German goods. Their effort was also supported by Lithuanians.

The entire Jewish press is pleased to note that the Jewish protest action has also resonated and received support among Lithuanians, regardless of any differences in class or views. All Lithuanians have marveled at Jewish unity.³

The Kaunas Jewish community also tried to help Jews in Germany and established an aid committee to provide support.

³ Ibid., l. 23.

WAR REFUGEES IN KAUNAS

By the mid-1930s, the plight of Jews in Germany became increasingly more complicated until it eventually developed into an international humanitarian crisis. After Nazi Germany's illegal *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria on March 12, 1938, it became obvious that Adolph Hitler's plans had entered a more active phase. Sporadic attacks and widespread discrimination against Jews evolved into the implementation of coercive policies. The annexation of Austria drove Jews to flee Germany. Unfortunately, neighboring and more distant countries were unwilling to receive hundreds of thousands of involuntary migrants.⁴

A conference was organized in France in July 1938 to address the issue. The gathering, which would be remembered in history as the Évian Conference, convened countries that were potentially able to receive refugees from Austria and Germany. But the conference was a failure. Participating countries adopted a declarative, although unofficial, policy, agreeing among themselves not to accept any refugees to avoid setting any precedent.⁵

But decisions taken by Lithuania as a sovereign state allowed some refugees from Germany and its occupied territories to enter and reside in the country until the summer of 1940. Only the loss of national sovereignty compelled refugees to seek alternative ways to assure their own safety.⁶

On March 22, 1939, Lithuania was forced to sign a treaty ceding the city and region of Klaipėda to Germany. After assuming control of the city, the Nazis ordered all Jews to leave.

As the car pulled away, Igor gazed back at the house he had lived in all his life. It had a round turret, just like a castle. He saw the sea spray against the rocks and wondered if he would ever see his home again. They drove farther and farther away from the sea until they reached Kaunas, the capital of Lithuania. Igor had never seen such a beautiful city. It had big buildings and wide, tree-lined streets.

William Kaplan⁷

⁴ For more see: Simonas Strelcovas. *Gerį, blogi, vargdieniai: Č. Sugihara ir Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabėgėliai Lietuvoje*. Vilnius, 2018, 24–57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ William Kaplan. *One More Border: The True Story of One Family's Escape from War-Torn Europe*. Greenwood Books, 2004, 10.

After Hitler launched his attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, Lithuania saw a new wave of refugees of Polish army officers and Jewish, Polish, and Lithuanian civilians. The Lithuanian Internal Ministry's Commissariat for War Refugees began to issue refugee certificates to anyone without personal identification documents. These papers later helped many to find salvation elsewhere. Refugees from Poland were issued visas to enter Lithuania and transit visas to third countries by staff working at Lithuania's Consulate General in Vilnius, including Birutė Verkeilytė-Fedaravičienė, Viktoras Čečėta and Antanas Trimakas, saving the lives of thousands of Jews in the process.

Lithuania signed a treaty with the USSR on October 10, 1939, restoring Lithuanian control of part of the Vilnius region. As borders shifted, Poles in and around Vilnius found themselves living in a new country – Lithuania. Stripped of their political rights, they became expatriates, “aliens”. They, like the war refugees, were now foreigners.⁸

At the initiative of the Federation of Polish Jews in America, the Lithuanian Consul General in New York, Mr. Budrys, sent a telegram to the Lithuanian Red Cross in Kaunas, proposing the creation of an Aide Committee to help Polish Jews sheltering in Vilnius. The assistance provided should be twofold: First, the refugees must be protected from the cold and hunger, and secondly, emigration to America should be organized for those refugees who have family there and can receive them.

Aide for Jewish Refugees from Poland. *Apžvalga*, 1939⁹

It is believed that some 35,000 civilians and interned Polish soldiers found refuge in Lithuania.¹⁰

⁸ Tomas Balkelis. *Karo pabėgėlių krizė ir etninis konfliktas Lietuvoje 1939–1940 metais*. *Oikos*, 2007, nr. 4, 38.

⁹ Pagalba Lenkijos žydų pabėgėliams. *Apžvalga*, 1939 m. spalio 29 d., 1.

¹⁰ Simonas Strelcovas. *Gerį, blogi, vargdieniai: Č. Sugihara ir Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabėgėliai Lietuvoje*. Vilnius, 2018, 159.



THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION

The first Soviet occupation of Lithuania began on June 15, 1940, and fundamentally changed the lives of everyone in the country – inhabitants and refugees alike.

So long as it had remained an independent country, Jews felt safe in Lithuania. But the increasing sense of insecurity resulting from the onset of Soviet occupation drove them to flee the country.¹¹ War refugee certificates for Jewish refugees were also being

issued at the time by the Polish Legation in Kaunas. Although the mission had been formally closed in October 1939, it continued to issue certificates until August 8, 1940, working out of the still functioning British Consulate, which had provided shelter to diplomats representing the Polish government-in-exile.¹²

Documents issued by Lithuanian and Polish authorities were vitally important for those wishing to leave Kaunas and Lithuania.

¹¹ Žilvinė Petrauskaitė. Šiaurės Kasablanka: Lietuvos didybė nyrant į prarają, 2019–09–17. <https://www.alfa.lt/straipsnis/50401201/siaures-kasablanka-lietuvos-didybe-nyrant-i-praraja>

¹² List of Jews and Poles who paid the Polish Consulate in Kovno for various consular services, 30 April-08 August 1940. Yad Vashem Documents Archive, Record Group 0.6, File Number 53.



Monument to Chiune Sugihara (by Martynas Gaubas, 2020).
S. Daukanto Street, Kaunas. Photograph: Darius Petreikis

Transit visas out of the country were often issued based on these documents by Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara and the Dutch Honorary Consul Jan Zwartendijk, who together saved thousands of lives. But they would never have been able to provide assistance if not for the issuance of necessary documents and the shelter provided by the Republic of Lithuania.¹³

Unfortunately, even after obtaining long-sought-after visas, not everyone succeeded in escaping. Some visas were confiscated by Soviet police forces, or militia.

I am a refugee from Poland, from the city of Warsaw, and I am now unemployed. I wish to go to America. This summer I purchased a rail ticket from Intourist to travel to Suruga, Japan. I paid 30 dollars for the ticket. I purchased those 30 dollars from a stranger at Intourist who was there at the same time and was also buying a ticket. . . . I had to purchase those dollars because payment was required in dollars, which I didn't have, and that man offered to sell me the required 30 dollars. I don't remember how much I paid for those dollars, maybe 12–14 litas for 1 dollar. I then took the purchased dollars and paid for the ticket. Director Tkačas recorded the value in his [notebook] and on the ticket. I even asked Tkačas whether I would have problems because I paid in a foreign currency, and he replied that, either way, the dollars would go to a bank in the Soviet Union. The same day that I received the Intourist ticket and change in the amount of 2 dollars and a few litas, it was confiscated from

13 Zigmas Vitkus. 1939-iejų: lenkai – pirmi kovoti, lietuviai – pirmi padėti, 2019–09–01. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/nuomones/3/1092383/zigmas-vitkus-1939-iejai-lenkai-pirmi-kovoti-lietuviai-pirmi-padeti>



Monument to Jan Zwartendijk (by Giny Vos, 2018).
Laisvės Alėja, Kaunas. Photograph: Darius Petreikis

me by the militia at a vegetarian cafeteria. I did not engage in any foreign currency speculation and my conscience is clear.

Interrogation testimony of Sholom Nutkewicz,
residing in Kaunas. December 16, 1940¹⁴

Crackdowns against Lithuania's inhabitants began early on in the first Soviet occupation. Mass arrests and deportations also targeted Jews. One of the largest deportation campaigns occurred in June 1941. Over 15% of those deported by the Soviets that month were Jews.¹⁵

On 15 June 1941 the deportations started. It was a terrible day. Hundreds of friends of mine were among the deportees, since all of them were either Zionists or from well-to-do families. Without wasting much time, our family went into hiding. For several nights we slept in Williampole at the house of my uncle. After several days, the deportations stopped and all the people were moved out of Lithuania in echelons towards Siberia. We returned home but could not get over a mysterious feeling that maybe the deportees unwittingly were at the receiving end of a major lucky strike. They were being taken to the depths of Russia, away from the war and away from the border with the murderous Nazi Germany, while we remained in Lithuania close to the powder keg.

14 1940 m. gruodžio 16 d. protokolai. LCVA, f. 786, ap. 2, b. 82.

15 *Kaip tai įvyko? Christoph Dieckmann atsako Rūtai Vanagaitei.* Vilnius, 2020, 59.



A work brigade in the Kaunas ghetto. 1941–1943. LCVA

UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION

Many failed to leave Lithuania in time. Even darker days followed. On June 23, 1941, control of Kaunas was assumed by rebels of the Lithuanian Activist Front. Arrests of Jews began that same day, detaining individuals suspected of collaborating with the Soviet government or shooting partisan fighters. Detainees were usually held in a jail on A. Mickevičiaus Street. Nevertheless, there were no pogroms or massacres of Jews until the arrival of German armed forces and security police units.¹⁶ The persecution of the Jews began on June 25, 1941, when the city was taken over by the German military

and security police. One of their main missions was organizing the massacre of the Jewish population with the assistance of local residents.¹⁷ Incited by the German security police, Lithuanians began killing Jews on the evening of June 25, in Vilijampolė.

It is not possible to relate everything that happened the night of June 25th in Slobodka. But what I will relate is enough to show the extent of the Germans' cruelty. They were things the world had not yet seen. We, a group of 12 rabbis and a few yeshiva students, were

¹⁶ Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas 1941–1944*. Vilnius, 2014, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.



The Kaunas ghetto orchestra. 1942–1943. Photograph: Hirsh Kadushin, Yad Vashem Archives

hidden that night in the home of the dean of the Slobodka Yeshiva, Rav Avrohom Grodzensky. With us was the great gaon (genius), Rav Elchonon Wasserman. We spent that night praying and weeping. But we also discussed what we could do.

Rav Avrohom Drushkovich, an elderly man and former mashgiach (dean and spiritual mentor) of the Volozhin Yeshiva, one of the greatest Lithuanian yeshivas, came to join us. From what he told us he had seen happening on the streets of Slobodka and had heard was going on in Kovno, it became clear that the Germans and Lithuanians seemed intent on killing all the Jews. What were we to do? Could we devise some sort of plan? That was the issue that wearied us that night while Jews were dying in the streets of Slobodka.

That Wednesday evening at dusk, Lithuanian Nazis, accompanied by mobs of ordinary Lithuanians, marched into the Jewish section of Slobodka with axes and saws. They began the Slobodka pogrom on Yurborger Street, moving from house to house, from apartment to apartment, from room to room, killing every Jew they encountered, old and young alike.

Ephraim Oshry¹⁸

Between 600 and 1,000 Jews were massacred during the Vilijampolė pogrom on June 25–27, 1941.¹⁹

¹⁸ For more see: Rabbi Ephraim Oshry. *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*. New York: The Judaica Press, 1995, 1–4.

¹⁹ *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 88–89.



Monument to murdered Jews at the Kaunas 7th Fort (by Alfonsas Vaura, 2016).
Kaunas. Photograph: Rokas Tenys and Kas vyksta Kaune

The killing of Jews then moved from Vilijampolė to the center of Kaunas. One of the most horrific pogroms took place on June 27, 1941 at the former Lietūkis garage on Miško Street, where some 50 to 60 Jewish men were killed in full view of a group of German soldiers and Lithuanian bystanders.²⁰ The pogroms organized by the German security police continued against the Jews in Kaunas until June 29, taking the lives of some 1,000 people.²¹

Starting on June 30, 1941, Jews began to be executed at the Seventh Fort, further away from the city center of Kaunas. Some 5,000 Jews are estimated to have been killed at the fort. A small number of Jews imprisoned at the Seventh Fort were able to survive.²² Lawyer Simon Yoffe wrote about the circumstances of his rescue and what he witnessed at the Seventh Fort:

Suddenly, the shooting stopped. Some high Lithuanian officers came in; one was at least a colonel and ordered a ceasefire. A lower

²⁰ Ibid., 89.

²¹ Christoph Dieckmann, Saulius Sužiedėlis. *Lietuvos žydų persekiojimas ir masinės žudynės 1941 m. vasarą ir rudenį: šaltiniai ir analizė*. Vilnius, 2006, 39.

²² Ibid., 48.



Kaunas 9th Fort Monument to the Victims of Nazism (by Alfonsas Vincentas Ambraziūnas, 1984).
Kaunas. Photograph: Sergey Orlov, Kaunas 9th Fort Archives

officer then declared that all men who had fought as volunteers in the Lithuanian army during the war of liberation were to assemble at the gate. ... There were approximately seventy of us. At first, we were ridiculed to the amusement of the bystanders, but then we were told to line up in formation, the gate opened, and we were led outside.

Not everyone was lucky enough to be killed outright. Most of the people hit were severely injured and were crying and sobbing in pain. Many of the wounded were twisting in agony and asking the bandits to kill them, but the bastards would laugh and say, "you

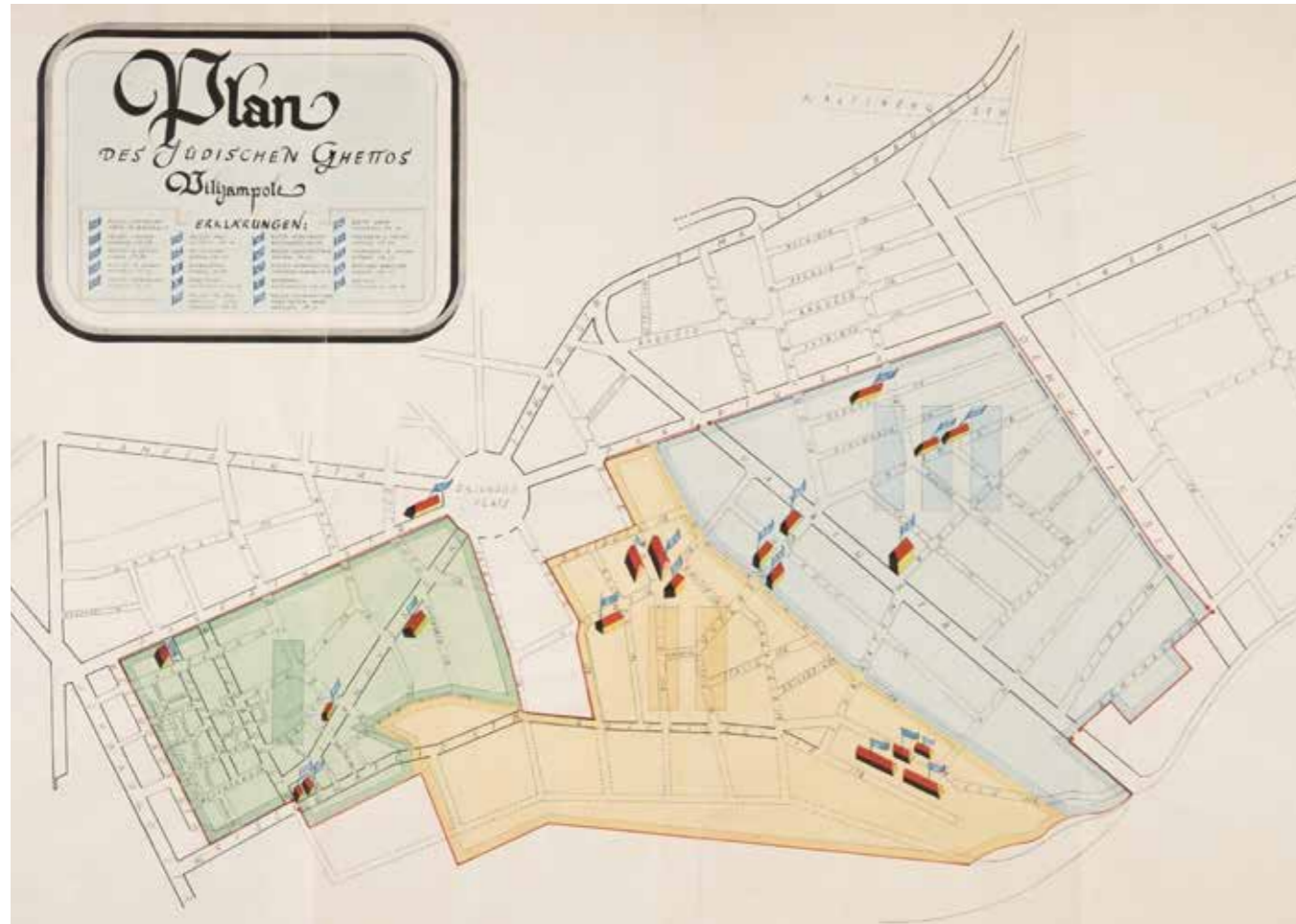
*were told to be quiet", but would not shoot, and instead left them to die in pain. The living and the dead were lying side by side.*²³

The colonel mentioned in this account was Jurgis Bobelis.²⁴

The execution of Jews later took place at the Fourth and Ninth Forts.

²³ William W. Mishell. *Kaddish for Kovno*, 39–40.

²⁴ Avraham Tory. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*. Vilnius: Moksto ir enciklopedijų leidybos inst., 2000, 12.



Map of the Kaunas ghetto. 1941–1944. LCVA

ESTABLISHING THE KAUNAS GHETTO

The Nazi regime used the pogroms and massacres at the forts as a means to force the Kaunas Jewish community to move to the ghetto. Convening a meeting of Kaunas Jewish representatives on July 7, 1941, the Nazis proceeded to blackmail them, alleging that “the Lithuanians had declared that they no longer wished to live together with the Jews. They are demanding that the Jews be isolated in the ghetto.”²⁵ Hypocritically promising to end the ex-

ecutions, they claimed that “Jews must choose: Resign yourselves to your current fate, to chaos and blood, or leave the city and move to the ghetto.”²⁶ For the Jews, the only real option seemed to be securing minimal protection in the isolation of the ghetto and quietly resigning themselves to the plundering of their property.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Christoph Dieckmann, Saulius Sužiedėlis. *Lietuvos žydų persekiojimas, 50.*

²⁵ Ibid., 10

The following order was issued on July 10, 1941:

*As of July 12 of this year, all individuals of Jewish ethnicity living in the city of Kaunas, regardless of age or sex, shall begin to wear the following symbol on the left side of their chest: a yellow Star of David, 8–10 centimeters in diameter. . . . From July 15 to August 15 of this year, all individuals of Jewish ethnicity living in the city of Kaunas, regardless of age or sex, must move to the Kaunas suburb of Vilijampolė.*²⁸

In late July, German civilian administrators took over the governance of Kaunas from German military officers. The new Kaunas City Commissar, Hans Kramer, signed two decrees on July 28 and 31, meant to humiliate the city’s Jews by depriving them of their rights: Jews were forbidden to use sidewalks, visit public parks and squares, ride public transportation, or dispose of their own property.²⁹ In his July 31 decree, Kramer supplemented the earlier order that Jews wear a yellow, 8–10 centimeter in diameter Star of David on the left side of their chest, now requiring that such patches would also have to be worn on the back, and commanded that the resettlement of Jews “from the inner city to the suburb of Vilijampolė must be completed no later than by August 15, 1941.”³⁰

In July, a committee of Kaunas Jewish representatives was formed to organize the resettlement of all Jews to Vilijampolė. The committee soon received an order from the Germans to elect a single representative – a senior Jew. No one volunteered for the position. Gathering on August 4, the leaders of the Kaunas Jewish community convinced Dr. Elhanan Elkes to assume the post.³¹ Elkes wrote about this experience in a letter to his son and daughter dated October 19, 1943:

From the day of the Ghetto’s founding, I stood at its head. Our community chose me, and the authorities confirmed me as chairman of the Council of Elders, together with my friend, the advocate Leib Garfunkel, a former member of the Lithuanian parliament, and a few other close and good people, concerned and caring for the fate of the surviving few. We are trying to steer our battered ship in furious seas, when waves of decrees and decisions threaten to drown it every

²⁸ 1941 m. liepos 10 d. Kauno Komendanto ir Kauno Miesto Burmistro įsakymas. *J Laisvę*, 1941 m. liepos 11 d., 4.

²⁹ Privalomas nutarimas nr. 1. *J Laisvę*, 1941 m. liepos 28 d., 1; Viešas skelbimas nr. 2. *J Laisvę*, 1941 m. liepos 31 d., 4.

³⁰ Viešas skelbimas nr. 2. *J Laisvę*, 1941 m. liepos 31 d., 4.

³¹ Avraham Tory. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*, 29.

*day. Through my influence I succeeded, at times, in easing the verdict and in scattering some of the dark clouds that hung over our heads. I bore my duties with my head high and an upright countenance. Never did I ask for pity; never did I doubt our rights. I argued our case with total confidence in the justice of our demands.*³²

Later, a Council of Elders was established on the basis of the original committee and consisted of Leib Garfunkel (who served as Elhanan Elkes’ deputy), Moses Kopelman, Jacob Goldberg, R. Rabinovich, and Rabbi Shmuel Abba Snieg.³³ Israel Bernstein, a lawyer, served as the council’s secretary until July 5, 1942, when he was replaced by Avraham Golub Tory.³⁴

The Council of Elders also appointed ten ghetto policemen, designating Moses Kopelman as their leader.³⁵ The council was tasked with organizing life in the ghetto: negotiating the ghetto’s territory, allocating residential space, and establishing bakeries, hospitals, pharmacies, and other institutions. Unlike in other ghettos, the leadership of the Kaunas ghetto – the Council of Elders, the police force, etc. – was elected by Jews themselves and not imposed by the Germans.³⁶

By order of the Kaunas ghetto commander Fritz Jordan, issued August 15, 1941, the ghetto was declared closed and leaving it was strictly prohibited.³⁷ The area was enclosed with a barbed wire fence. The resulting Large and Small Ghettos were connected by a small wooden footbridge over Panerių Street. Nearly 30,000 Jews now lived within this small area.³⁸

³² Ibid., 509–510.

³³ Samuel D. Kossow. *Inside the Kovno Ghetto*. In: *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*. By Anonymous Members of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police. Translated and edited by Samuel Schalkowsky. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2014, 19.

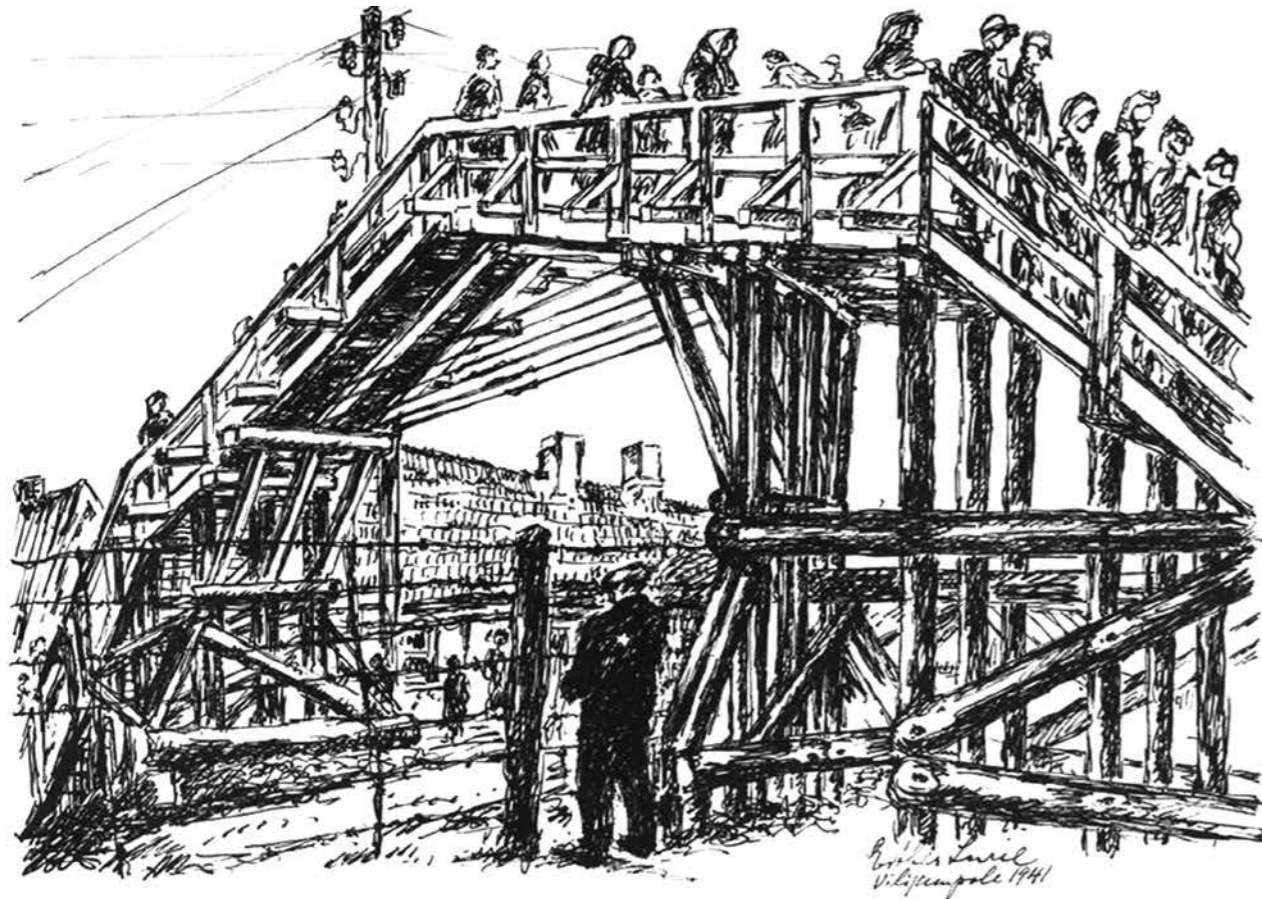
³⁴ Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas 1941–1944*. Vilnius, 2014, 47.

³⁵ *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 78.

³⁶ Samuel D. Kossow. *Inside the Kovno Ghetto*, 48.

³⁷ Avraham Tory. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*, 34.

³⁸ Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas 1941–1944*. Vilnius, 2014, 49.



Wooden Bridge. Esther Lurie, 1941.
Reproduction held by the Kaunas 9th Fort Museum

LIFE IN THE GHETTO

Very soon, the ghetto was subjected to so-called “actions”. The Germans encouraged men in the ghetto to register for work assignments allegedly requiring a higher level of education. By August 18, 534 men responded to the call. It was later learned that all of them were executed at the Fourth Fort. The event later became known as the “Intellectuals’ Action”.³⁹ During subsequent

actions on September 26 and October 4, nearly 3,500 ghetto inhabitants lost their lives.⁴⁰ The “Great Action” was carried out on October 28–29, 1941, in the ghetto, in Demokratų Square, during which some 10,000 people were murdered at the Ninth Fort.

Around five o'clock in the morning doors started to open and people began to flock into the streets. The morning was very chilly, a typical autumn day with a thin layer of snow covering the ground. It was still dark and the air was extremely damp. The last visible stars gradually disappeared as the crowd started to swell. One could see mothers

39 Išgelbėti bulvių maišuose: 50 Kauno geto vaikų istorijų. Parengė Solomonas Abramovičius ir Jakovas Zilbergas. Vilnius, 2014, 28.

40 Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 31–33.

with children in their arms, old people who could barely walk, small children holding the hands of their mothers, grown-ups supporting their elderly parents or grandparents, and even invalids supported by canes. Some people who were unable to walk were carried out on stretchers. Everybody tried to make it out of the house to avoid being shot. Approximately twenty-eight thousand people were thus moved in the direction of Demokratų Plaza.

Suddenly Rauca appeared on the plaza and an air of doom overcame everybody. . . . With an unusual calmness he directed people to the right or to the left, totally ignoring family composition. At will and with obvious delight, he separated parents from children, husbands from wives, and children from mothers.

We had no idea how many were directed to the left side, but from all indications it was about ten thousand people.

William W. Mishell⁴¹

That evening, they lined us up in rows. They only got to checking our row, where I, my aunt and my grandmother were standing, after dark. I was sick at the time and had an outbreak of boils, so I looked very tired – as did my grandmother. Only my aunt was able to work. A Jewish policeman walked up to us. He was a friend of my father’s, so he let us through to the “good side” and we weren’t condemned to die. Everyone was surprised. It was God’s gift to us.

Interview with Dobrė Rozenbergienė, 2017⁴²

After what became known as the “Great Action”, the ghetto settled into a relatively calm period that lasted until September 1943. The Nazis felt that the ghetto had been cleansed of all unnecessary Jews incapable of performing the work needed for German military purposes. Some 17,000 Jews remained in the ghetto. During this period, no mass killings were conducted⁴³ and ghetto inhabitants were exploited as a much needed, cheap labor force. Indeed, in 1943 the Kaunas ghetto Jews worked in ninety different locations.⁴⁴

That happy Sunday would pass and it would be back to work. Every

41 William W. Mishell. *Kaddish for Kovno*, 90–91.

42 Atminties biuras: D. Rozenbergienė. *Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis*, 2017. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-d-rozenbergiene/>

43 Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 126.

44 *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 268.

day, the women of the brigade were driven like cattle by a shepherd with a gun. Days, weeks, and months passed like this. And always the same. And every day you went to the brigade. You counted the hours until twelve, then lunch, then another few hours until five and six o'clock until finally – blessed be that hour – we went home. And that road. Pattering in the mud, wading through puddles, and the swearing and moaning of exhausted old women. Finally, there was the gate and the ghetto. Finally! Home. It should have brought joy, but no – the next morning would be the same. Always the same, from point to point, the day never changed. A day of menial labor, a day of misery.

From the diary of Tamara Lazerson, January 23, 1944⁴⁵

Starvation was a constant companion of life in the ghetto. Established food rations did not always reach the ghetto population. Some food products were obtained via contraband. By late 1942, the Germans permitted ghetto inhabitants to keep six cows. Empty spaces in the ghetto were converted by residents into gardens to grow potatoes.⁴⁶

A Jewish farmer led his plow, harnessed to two horses, over a large, wide field on Demokratų Square. Girls wearing green, red, and blue skirts were preparing narrow garden plots on the adjacent field, planting in the soil the seeds they were taking out of paper bags. It was a true spring spectacle, like the ones we used to see in a village before the war, or in a painting.

The sun fills the world with warmth and brightness. It also sends its light and warmth to us in the Ghetto. This pretty picture is sharply circumscribed, however, by the barbed-wire fence surrounding us. No painter in his artistic imagination could conjure up the combination of a fairy tale – an open landscape – and a barbed-wire fence.

Avraham Tory⁴⁷

What I remember most from life in the ghetto was the constant fear, the incredible hunger, the torturous longing and loneliness. My father tried to trade for food, but there was no way to transport the produce. But the Lithuanians would help us. They traded with us. We’d usually exchange clothing for food. I thank them for that. That food kept us from dying of starvation.

45 Tamara Lazersonaitė. *Dienoraštis, 1942–1947 m.* <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irm559197>.

46 *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 189.

47 Avraham Tory. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*, 319.

I had many photographs in our home in the ghetto. They became toys when my parents left to work and my brothers went off to school. When I'd be left alone in the ghetto, I was mostly afraid that some angry man would come with a gun and shoot me. That fear has stayed with me to this day. Only it's different now...

Interview with Judita Mackevičienė, 2017⁴⁸

A Culture and Education Division was established in the ghetto on November 25, 1941. The Council of Elders also decided to open a school as part of that division, for children 7 to 14 years old. A second school was opened on May 25, 1942.⁴⁹ The occupying government ordered the closure of the schools that same summer, but small, illegal classes began meeting in the ghetto soon thereafter.⁵⁰

A professional training school was established on September 13, 1942, providing classes on general and technical subjects. With the assistance of Mendel Sadovsky, the school was opened and directed by the agronomist J. Oleiskis. The institution, which also organized various cultural activities, remained open until the liquidation of the ghetto in 1944.⁵¹ The professional training provided by the school directly affected the lives of students in the ghetto, since many teenagers were able to obtain work permits.

Despite inhumane conditions, attempts were made to bolster the spirits of the ghetto population. The ghetto had its own library, drama club, and small orchestra.

After the so-called "Intellectuals' Action", artists concealed their profession. The ghetto's Council of Elders decided that the best way to protect musicians was to deputize them as police officers. Thus, on January 3, 1942, a new art division was established within the ghetto police force.

The Kaunas ghetto police orchestra, with thirty-five musicians and five vocalists, included former State Opera performers, conservatory teachers and students, as well as professional and amateur musicians. The orchestra was led by former stars of the interwar Lithuanian music world: conductor M. Hofmekler and

concertmaster A. Stupel. Professional pianist and composer Percy Haid was not only responsible for orchestral arrangements, but also composed several new works, including the famous ghetto song *Mamele* and *Fantasy in Yellow*.

The ghetto orchestra's first official concert took place on August 23, 1942.⁵²

When we entered, the hall was already half full and people were still coming. It seemed that there would be a full house. I looked at the audience and memories of concerts I had attended in town came back to my mind. In the old days the crowd was dressed festively, the mood was joyous, the people relaxed and rested, all well-fed and in good humor. There was the scent of perfume and the glitter of jewelry. A concert in Kovno was more than just coming to listen to music, it was a social affair. But how different was the crowd today: the clothes were shabby, the faces drawn, no perfume or jewelry. Most of the people were hungry, tired from slave labor, and the mood was subdued. Everybody had the same feeling: was it really right to have a concert when the blood of our murdered people was still warm?

William W. Mishell⁵³

Over the two years of its existence, the orchestra performed 80 concerts – not just for ghetto residents, but also for high-ranking SS officers. Despite some criticism, most agreed that the concerts had helped raise spirits in the ghetto and that they were a noble respite in the horrific daily life of the ghetto.

It was said that the ghetto is not the place to give concerts; this is not the place to make musical presentations and to be merry. We have neither the right nor the desire to forget all that we have lived through. On the other hand, it became evident later on that the concerts also had a positive character, in the sense that, when all is said and done, one must have in the ghetto a few hours in the week when one can forget a little, to rest up somewhat from the daily nightmare and to rise somewhat above the day-to-day grayness, into a nicer world that fills one with hope and gives courage.

The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police ⁵⁴

48 Atminties biuras: J. Mackevičienė. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2017. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinimis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-j-mackeviciene/>

49 Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 82–83.

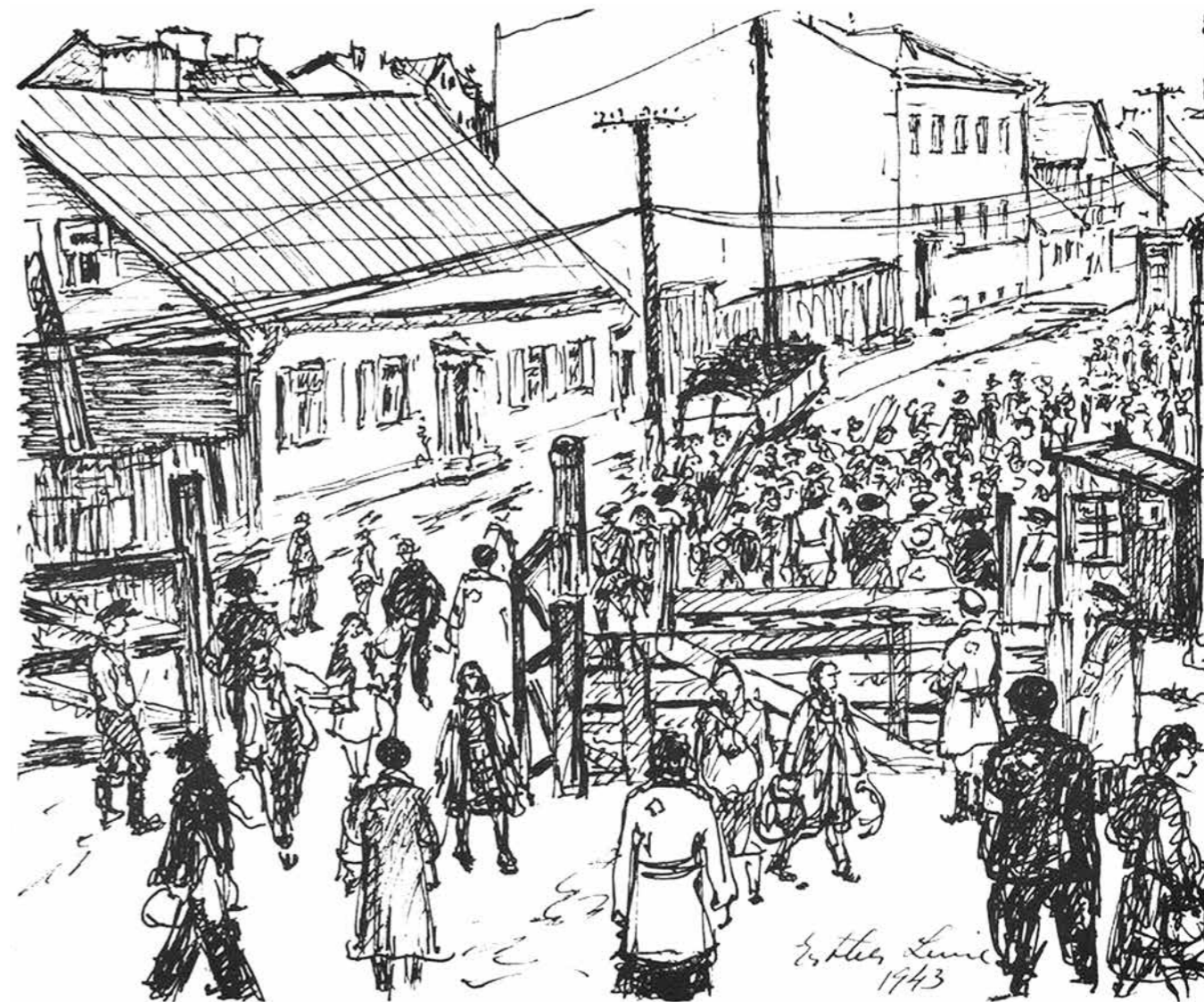
50 Avraham Tory. *Kauno getas: diena po dienos*, 461.

51 Ibid., 135.

52 For more see: D. Petrauskaitė. *Muzika Kauno žydų gete. Lietuvos muzikologija*, t. 7, 2006, 106–117

53 William W. Mishell. *Kaddish for Kovno*, 131–132.

54 *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police*, 362.





Main Ghetto Gate and View of Slobodka Bridge. Esther Lurie, 1942.
Reproduction held by the Kaunas 9th Fort Museum

LIQUIDATION OF THE GHETTO

In the autumn of 1943, the Kaunas ghetto was reorganized as KZ Kauėn, a concentration camp controlled by the SS. Control over Jewish life was restricted even more. The mood grew bleak and the air was full of suspicion that the final hour of destruction was near. That same year, on October 8, Avraham Golub spoke to a gathering of ghetto residents celebrating Yom Kippur:

Do not give up, try to survive, hide, escape the ghetto, go to the forests. We must survive to tell this tale of horror to the comfortable world that does not want to hear it. I want you all to understand that this is the last Yom Kippur in the ghetto. There will be no more

*ghetto by this time next year. It is everyone's responsibility to try to find a way to survive.*⁵⁵

Ghetto inhabitants searched for ways to survive. Some left their children in the hands of trusted Lithuanians in the hopes of saving them. Some 500 Kaunas Jews, most of them children, found refuge with Lithuanian families.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ William W. Mishell. *Kaddish for Kovno*, 166.

⁵⁶ *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 269–270.



Demokratų Square. Esther Lurie, 1943.
Reproduction held by the Kaunas 9th Fort Museum

They took me and another Jewish child in. The room where we lived was very long and narrow. We both lay in a narrow bed. I on one side, he on the other. Mountains of pillows and blankets were piled on the bed, above me. That's how they hid us. The woman who cared for us would only let us poke our noses out. She forbade us to talk, too. That's how I escaped the ghetto.

Interview with Judita Mackevičienė, 2017⁵⁷

The Yad Vashem (Hebrew for “eternal name”) Holocaust memorial center in Jerusalem maintains a list of individuals who saved Jews, declaring them Righteous Among the Nations. That

list also includes 239 people from Kaunas and the surrounding region, such as Pranas Mažylis, Sofija Kymantaitė-Čiurlionienė, Ona Landsbergienė, Elena Žalinkevičaitė-Petrauskienė and Kipras Petrauskas, Kazys Grinius and Kristina Griniuvienė, Elena Buivydaitė-Kutorgienė, priests Bronislovas and Juozas Paukščia, and others.⁵⁸

People flowed in an unbroken stream straight to the Binkis house. They'd stay there until Sofija could find them another, safer place to hide. My parents also quickly moved to other hiding places – both

⁵⁸ Rimantas Stankevičius. *Pasaulio tautų teisuolių išskirtinės istorijos*, 2019–03–01. <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/kaunas/menas-ir-pramogos/pasaulio-tautu-teisuoliu-isskirtines-istorijos-903493>

⁵⁷ *Atminties biuras*: J. Mackevičienė. Kaunas 2022.

went to different ones, but I had a hard time finding a place, so I stayed with the Binkis family for a while. They put me in the crib made for Iga, the Binkis' six-month-old granddaughter. Surprisingly, no one paid much attention to my sickly coughing and interrupting or were worried that I might make the baby sick. They welcomed me into their family and into Iga's crib as they would have any other person.

Kama Ginkas⁵⁹

Vladimir Zubov would drive his own car through the villages around Kaunas, looking for safe places where the children from the ghetto could be hidden. He was friends with Petras Baublys, a pediatrician and director of the Lopšelis infants' home, who agreed, albeit with some difficulty, that Jewish children would be baptized in Catholic churches and registered as orphans using forged documents.

Esther Elin (Elinaitė)⁶⁰

Living in the ghetto, we were always helping one another survive. My father had made a hiding place in our little house and we'd hide there during the actions. A section of the basement had been walled off, with an opening made under the beds. The space was very small, and we'd usually hide there with some of our neighbors. Others had to cover the hiding place with a lid, push the bed over that lid, and then move the closet against the door. It was only thanks to those who couldn't fit into the hideout that we were able to get out again afterward. It was very scary and confining, you couldn't even move. We'd constantly hear German voices and the noise from heavy shoes. . . .

One evening, my guardian Natalija was visited by a woman in a black hat. She only spoke German and had a very stern face. I got scared and ran off to hide. She turned out to be my savior and adopted mother, Helene Holzman. . . . I was brought to a care home. One priest gave me a fake birth certificate and told me to forget my real name and never tell it to anyone. I had to pick a Lithuanian name: Birutė, Jadzytė, Danutė. . . . That's how I became Danutė. And my new surname, Vitkauskaitė, was created from my real one – Vitkinaitė.

Interview with Fruma Kučinskienė, 2017⁶¹

Between October and December 1943, some 4,000 Kaunas ghetto prisoners were moved to work camps in Aleksotas and Šančiai, and about 3,000 more were transported to labor camps in Estonia.⁶² The "Children's Action" took place on March 27–28, 1944, during which some 1,500 children under the age of 12 and 300 elderly persons were either moved to work camps or killed.⁶³

The younger generation, under twelve, died. The old people died. We will die, too! But the mothers, the mothers, the mothers. A cat will scratch and bite but never give up her kittens; a hen will cover her chicks with her body and defend them until her last drop of blood, but Jewish mothers must give up their children and watch them being tossed like puppies into a truck. But there were some heroic mothers who strangled their children with their own hands, who asked to be killed first and only over their dead bodies could their children be taken from them! Eternal glory to such mothers!

From the diary of Tamara Lazerson, March 17, 1944⁶⁴

The Kaunas ghetto was finally liquidated on July 8–13, 1944. Between 6,000 and 7,000 people were transported to the Dachau and Stutthof concentration camps in Germany and the remaining ghetto buildings were set on fire.⁶⁵

Aleksandras Štomas, who escaped the ghetto in 1943 and found refuge with the family of Marija and Antanas Macenavičius, remembers:

As soon as the Germans had been driven out of Kaunas on August 1, 1944, I immediately went to the Kaunas ghetto hoping to find, dead or alive, my mother and other relatives and friends. As you probably know, before they abandoned Kaunas, the Germans burned and demolished nearly all of the buildings in the ghetto, burying beneath ashes and ruins several thousand people who had tried to hide in pits, so-called "malinas," dug into the basements under those buildings, to avoid being taken to concentration camps in Germany. So, I thought I might find my own people among those thousands of corpses, and somewhere inside me I hoped that some of them might have survived and that I would meet them there. (In fact, only some 30 of the thousands of people hiding in the

62 Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 127.

63 *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 270.

64 Tamara Lazersonaitė. *Dienoraštis, 1942–1947 m.*

65 Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 127–128.

59 *Išgelbėti bulvių maišuose*, 225–226.

60 *Ibid.*, 272.

61 *Atminties biuras*: F. Kučinskienė. Kaunas 2022.



Ruins of the Kaunas ghetto. 1944. LCVA

*"malinas" survived, and my relatives and friends were not among them; nor were they among the corpses. I later learned that my mother and a few other relatives who had managed to survive until 1944 were all removed from the ghetto and brought to the concentration camps in Germany, where my mother and most of my relatives died.*⁶⁶

66 Pokalbis su Štomu. *Akiračiai*, 1984, nr. 4, 6.

Of a total population of 37,000, only between 3,000 and 4,000 Kaunas Jews survived: 500–700 by escaping to join the Soviet partisans, about 500 who found refuge with Lithuanian families, and the remaining 2,000–3,000 in concentration camps in Germany and Nazi-occupied Poland.⁶⁷

67 *Kaip tai įvyko?*, 272.



Recycled Memory. Installation by Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz on Sajungos Square, adjacent to the former Kaunas ghetto. 11th Kaunas Biennial "THERE AND NOT THERE: The (Im)possibility of a Monument" (2017), curated by Paulina Pukytė. Photographs by Remis Ščerbauskas

JEWIS IN SOVIET-ERA KAUNAS



The Kaunas Choral Synagogue in the foreground. 1972. Photograph: Vilius Jasinevičius, LCVA

The Soviet Army entered Kaunas on August 1, 1944 – the start of the second Soviet occupation. On February 7, 1945, the Jewish Antifascist Committee registered barely 256 Jews who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust in Kaunas.¹ A registration of Jewish residents in Kaunas had begun somewhat earlier, and it listed 634 Jews residing in the city.² Some Jews had moved to Kaunas from other places in Lithuania and the Soviet Union, while others had moved away. According to data published on October 25, 1945, Kaunas had 558 Jewish residents.³ It has been estimated that, in 1946, there were between 4,000 to 5,000 Jews living in the city of Kaunas and its environs.⁴

The tiny surviving Kaunas Jewish community tried to rebuild their lives from the ashes. On August 10, 1944, the Kaunas Jews wrote an appeal to Ephraim Oshry, asking him to serve as the city's rabbi. After he accepted the proposal, Oshry was recognized by Soviet authorities as the official leader of the Kaunas Jewish community. He went on to rebuild the community and its house of worship. Rabbi Oshry later wrote:

My first step was to organize a community. This community was recognized by the Soviet authorities and received the status of a corporation authorized to deal with the remaining synagogues and cemeteries. . . . Although we had elected a gabbai for a synagogue, we actually had no synagogue suitable for praying. Almost all the synagogues and houses of study in the center of Kovno had been destroyed, while those that were left standing had been turned into horse stables, automobile garages, or warehouses.

¹ List of Jews in Kovno, compiled in February 1945. Yad Vashem Documents Archive, Record Group M. 7, File Number 1439.

² Arūnas Bubnys. *Kauno getas*, 116.

³ List of people in Kaunas, Lithuania, 1945. Yad Vashem Documents Archive, Record Group M. 18, File Number 1624.

⁴ LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 10, l. 40.



The gate to the Kaunas Choral Synagogue. 1940s. LCVA

Only one synagogue was miraculously intact – the Choral Synagogue. But it was too far from the area where most of the Jews had settled to be designated the house of prayer. So, Hoisman's kloiz at Mairana Street was designated the official synagogue.⁵

The extent of the loss experienced by the Kaunas Jewish community was also reflected in the fate of their religious centers destroyed by the Nazis. On September 1, 1944, Rabbi Oshry wrote a request that surviving synagogues be handed back to the Jewish community, stating: "Jewish synagogues were damaged by the German occupiers and turned into manure heaps, desecrating the sanctity of the temples."⁶ But not only did the Soviet government not support the rebuilding of Jewish religious and cultural life, it imposed various restrictions on it. The Jewish religious community in Kaunas sought to assume control over their surviving houses of worship and opposed the brutal policies of the Soviet regime.

When the Red Army left Kaunas, the Jewish Religious Community assumed control over only two synagogues of the forty-five that had existed in prewar Kaunas, including the only representative Choral Synagogue on Ožeškienės Street. On September 8 of this year, the Kaunas City Executive Committee Chairman convened a meeting with representatives of the Jewish community and, without permitting any discussion, informed them of his requirement that the community transfer to his authority the Kaunas Choral Synagogue for its conversion into a camp for German prisoners of war. If the community refused to transfer the synagogue to him out of their own good will, he would resort to force to do so. The demand to house the murderers of Lithuania's 200,000 Jews in a Jewish house of worship was viewed by the community as an attempt to disgrace the Jewish religion and their sense of self-respect.⁷

Soviet authorities ordered the mandatory registration of all religious communities. The Jewish religious community in Kaunas was registered on March 16, 1946, and was allowed to use two

⁵ Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*. New York: The Judaica Press, 1995, 156.

⁶ LCVA, f.R 181, ap. 1, b. 6, l. 115.

⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 113.



The former new Synagogue on Birštono Street in Kaunas. 1947. KMM

synagogues, one at Ožeškienės Street 9, the other at Maironio Street 28 (since demolished, its address is now listed as No. 28B Maironio Street). But despite the community's official registration, the Soviet government continued to hinder the practice of Jewish religious traditions.

*The Jewish faithful in Kaunas continue to consume kosher meat, produced through ritual slaughter. The matter usually went as follows: We would buy meat from private butchers on the condition that the washing would be done by our butchers (who adhered to ritual slaughter practices). The slaughtering would be done at the Kaunas City Executive Council Slaughterhouse. Since January of this year, whenever our butcher has arrived at the slaughterhouse, it has been declared that, according to an order of the KMKV, the slaughterhouse director will no longer permit ritual slaughter... Because ritual slaughter is one of the foundations of our faith and because the possibility of eating meat is being denied to our believers, we therefore ask the Comrade Representative to clarify this misunderstanding as quickly as possible.*⁸

⁸ LCVA, f.R-181, ap. 3, b. 10, l. 35.

The closure of the Jewish synagogue at Maironio Street 28 was proposed on September 24, 1948 in a secret letter from the representative of the Council for Religious Cult Affairs under the Soviet Council of Ministers to the Executive Committee Chairman of the Kaunas City Workers' Deputies Council (WDC).⁹ A final decision to close the synagogue was reached very soon thereafter, on September 29.¹⁰

In 1950, Lithuania's Jews were forbidden from organizing the baking of matzah for holidays but were allowed to bake for their own private use at home. That same year, the Kaunas Jewish religious community, with 3,000 members, celebrated Passover very modestly: Only some 200 Jews visited the synagogue during the holiday. Fearing the imposition of even stricter bans, celebrations and matzah baking took place in close circles of family members and loved ones.¹¹ Over time, Jews began to get their matzah from so-called "private sell-

⁹ KRVA, f.R-292, ap. 7, b. 31, l. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 6.

¹¹ LCVA, f.R-181, ap. 3, b. 25, l. 17–23.



The former new Synagogue on Birštono Street in Kaunas. 1949. KMM

ers” who baked at home and sold them secretly. Some Kaunas Jews received matzah from relatives in the West.¹² When they became aware of the situation, Soviet authorities began to allow synagogues to bake their own matzah. The Kaunas synagogue baked matzah not only for the religious community in its own city, but also for Jews in Klaipėda and Kaliningrad (Königsberg, Karaliaučius). According to the leader of the Kaunas religious community, some matzah was also purchased by military officers and sent to their family members in other cities in the Soviet Union.¹³

The “Erev Pesach” season in Kovno, like in the rest of Lithuania, began four weeks before Pesach, that is immediately after Purim, when the discomfiture of the arch-enemy Haman is celebrated. Passover, on the other hand, is a symbol of Liberty, a celebration of the final triumph of justice over tyranny. Passover is so highly regarded that much time is devoted to preparing for it, more than for all the other holidays. Perhaps the hard

work before Pesach is meant to symbolize the slavery of our ancestors before the deliverance. To the people of Kovno, the Niemen [Nemunas – Ed.] was an additional cause of anxiety during the weeks before Pesach. This gentle river, so placid at other times, would choose at this season, the busiest of the entire year, to go on a rampage....

This always occurred between Purim and Passover, when the people on both sides of the river could least afford the interruption. This inconvenience was only part of the damage done by the Niemen, for when the ice broke and the river overflowed, the flood water and blocks of ice often caused considerable damage and sometimes loss of life.¹⁴

In 1952, the Kaunas Workers’ Deputies Council closed the central Jewish cemetery in Žaliakalnis. The looting of marble tombstones began shortly thereafter. Very likely with the acquiescence of Soviet authorities, some 500 marble grave markers were toppled in the Žaliakalnis Jewish cemetery in one day on April 27, 1954.

¹⁴ H. Shafer. The Eve of Passover in Kovno. *The Sentinel*, April 15, 1943, 15.

¹² Ibid., L. 66.

¹³ Ibid., L. 36.



Kaunas ghetto cemetery in Vilijampolė, demolished in 1978 during the construction of Varnių Bridge. 1960s. Photograph: Stanislovas Lukošius, KMM

There was an outcry. Complaints were filed. Interrogations began. No one was charged, even after the republic’s prosecutor general, Comrade Bakharov, declared to me personally that the vandals would be identified. The looting of the toppled tombstones has now increased. More and more of those marble tombstones have begun appearing in Christian cemeteries, and the back of one still bears the inscription “Rachil”, but a cross and a different name have been inscribed on the front.¹⁵

After the closure of the Žaliakalnis Cemetery, the Kaunas city government allocated land for a Jewish cemetery in Aleksotas:

“where pigs and other animals grazed. With no other choice, Jews began to bury their dead here. A colonel who lived nearby didn’t like that, so he blocked the road to the cemetery with a two-meter fence. Now, there’s no way to bring the deceased to the cemetery – unless you bring them by airplane. The [city’s] executive committee

¹⁵ KRVA, f. R-292, ap. 7, b. 78, l. 13.

has ignored all verbal and written appeals, which has provoked great dissatisfaction among Jews in Kaunas.¹⁶

That same year, authorities closed the Jewish cemetery in Paneemunė, from which “gravel and sand was being dug in large quantities, unearthing human bones and skeletons. The bones were gathered up and sold on site to rag buyers. Neighborhood residents have been disgusted by such actions.”¹⁷

Passover (from the Hebrew word *pesach*, “to pass over”): one of the most important Jewish holidays, it is also known as the celebration of freedom or spring, symbolizing the Jewish people’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. Jews are not allowed to use leavened products such as bread or kvass during Passover, and instead bake and eat unleavened bread wafers called *matzah*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

SOVIET ANTISEMITISM

Some Jews hoped that life would return to “normal” after the war, but a policy of state-sponsored antisemitism was introduced throughout the Soviet Union in the 1940s. Initially limited to preventing the appointment of Jews to leadership positions, the program gradually developed a theoretical justification for antisemitism. By about 1948 and 1949, antisemitic sentiments became part of Soviet Communist Party ideology.¹⁸

The antisemitic political line also soon became evident in the Lithuanian SSR, in the fomenting of political and ideological antisemitic campaigns and the introduction of repressive measures. The Lithuanian Soviet regime’s hostility to Jews gradually increased, evolving into propaganda campaigns targeting “cosmopolitanism”, “Zionism” and “saboteur doctors”.¹⁹

The persecution of Lithuania’s Jews intensified between 1949 and 1953. The attention of the State Security Ministry (MGB in Russian) was principally directed at those Jews who had either owned businesses in independent Lithuania, participated in legally sanctioned organizations, fought in the Wars of Lithuanian Independence, or had studied abroad, etc. For example, Lazar Davidson’s attempt to become the deputy director of the Lithuanian Cinema Leasing Office in 1950 was blocked because he had operated a firm that distributed American films in Kaunas before the war.²⁰ Jews were soon labeled “enemies of the people” and “lackeys of imperialism”.²¹ In June 1951, a group of “Jewish bourgeois nationalists” was arrested in Kaunas.²²

The Doctor’s Plot, or the case of the “saboteur doctors”, began in Moscow in 1952. The MGB also took measures to expand this antisemitic campaign to Lithuania. On February 27, 1953, the head of the Soviet Lithuanian MGB informed Lithuanian Communist Party First Secretary Antanas Sniečkus that Jews and Lithuanians linked to the leadership of the Soviet Lithuanian Ministry of Health were responsible for the poor medical treatment of

prominent Soviet individuals. They were accused of causing the premature death of writer Petras Cvirka in 1947 and the high mortality rate of children at the Kaunas Republican Hospital.²³ Among the doctors arrested was Leon Kogan, who had been practicing in Kaunas since 1921. Kogan was the first physician to begin performing tracheal bronchoscopies and in June 1940 had been appointed the first Minister of Health in the pro-Soviet Lithuanian government.²⁴ The Doctor’s Plot case collapsed after the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953. Soon thereafter, it was announced that the arrested “saboteur doctors” were completely innocent and were to be released from prison.²⁵

Soviet propaganda against Zionism and Israel lessened in Lithuania after Stalin’s death, but intensified once more after Soviet-Israeli relations deteriorated as a result of the Suez crisis in 1956. During Nikita Khrushchev’s leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, anti-Zionist campaigns were pursued periodically. With a few slight fluctuations, the discrimination of Jews continued regularly until the emergence in 1988 of the Sąjūdis Lithuanian reform movement, which fundamentally changed attitudes toward other ethnic groups.²⁶

18 Kastytis Antanaitis. *1952–1953 metų antisemitinė kampanija Sovietų Socialistinių Respublikų Sąjungoje. Darbai ir dienos*, nr. 2016, nr. 65, 88.

19 Justas Stončius. *Antisemitizmas sovietinėje Lietuvoje 1944–1990 metais*. Mokslo daktaro disertacija. Klaipėda, 2018, 29.

20 Vytautas Tininis. *Komunistinio režimo nusikaltimai Lietuvoje 1944–1953 m.*, t. 2. Vilnius, 2003, 31.

21 Justas Stončius. *Antisemitizmas sovietinėje Lietuvoje*, 30

22 Vytautas Tininis. *Komunistinio režimo nusikaltimai Lietuvoje*, 260.

23 Kastytis Antanaitis. *1952–1953 metų antisemitinė kampanija*, 93.

24 Vytautas Tininis. *Komunistinio režimo nusikaltimai Lietuvoje*, 33.

25 Justas Stončius. *Antisemitizmas sovietinėje Lietuvoje*, 51.

26 *Ibid.*, 77, 135.



THEATRE AND AMATEUR CULTURAL GROUPS

Thanks to the efforts of Chaim Pinsker, a Jewish theatre was established in Kaunas in 1956. This small group of theatre enthusiasts staged their first production, *Mirele Efros*, in 1957, based on the play by Jacob Gordin. The premiere was a great success. After a few years, the small company began to perform at what was then known as the Labor Union Hall (Kęstučio Street 1, today the Kaunas Cultural Center), where other Kaunas non-professional groups also performed. Dance enthusiast M. Sayevich, music lover S. Gurvich (Gurvičiūtė), choir director I. Zingerman, and others helped found a Jewish national song and dance ensemble.²⁷ A choir and a popular music orchestra were established somewhat later.

The drama group staged productions based on works by Abraham Goldfaden, Jacob Gordin, Jacob Beltzer, Sholem Aleichem, and other playwrights. In a republic-wide review in 1968, the Kaunas Jewish drama company’s staging of *Di Tsvey Fardulte* (The Two Scatter-Brains), by Abraham Goldfaden, earned the group the title of best drama company and a people’s theatre transferable prize, and in 1969 the group took first place in their class in a national competition.²⁸

27 *Kauno žydų sąveiklos 50-metis*. Kauno žydų religinė bendruomenė, 2007, 2–3.

28 Jewish Drama Group Wins Lith Prize. *The Sentinel*, October 09, 1969, 5.

Such cultural activities, which helped to preserve a Jewish identity to a certain degree, did not escape Soviet ideological monitoring. In 1971, the Kaunas Jewish theatre company was not allowed to tour other cities in the USSR with Jewish communities. Protesting this decision, actors refused to perform. The Soviet government also made life difficult for Jews in Kaunas through other measures:

*They closed down Hebrew classes in the Kovno synagogue on grounds that the teacher had no license. When local Jews hired a new teacher with the proper credentials, the authorities still refused to reopen the classes. They claimed that Hebrew classes were permitted only where 50 percent of the students have applied for visas to go to Israel. In Kovno, less than half of the pupils have made such applications.*²⁹

The Kaunas Jewish theatre company disbanded for a time. In 1976, a group of new enthusiasts of Jewish art came together. A dance group was led by Lena Zaretskaya and a vocal ensemble by Masha Golsberg, Masha Wolpe, and later, Batya Gomberg. The group’s orchestra was conducted by Natasha Waldman and its

29 Kovno Jewish Theatrical Troupe Protests Confinement to Boundaries of the City. *The Sentinel*, December 16, 1971, 70.



Musicians of the Kaunas Jewish Amateur Company. Personal archive of Mauša Bairakas

drama company by Kopel Yudelevich. The Kaunas Jewish amateur company also performed on stages in Vilnius, Palanga, Druskininkai, and Birštonas.³⁰

Although Kaunas had become more open after 1975, it was still forbidden to sing in Hebrew – everything had to be rewritten in Yiddish. No one usually reviewed our repertoire. We had friends who'd send us records by Israel's most popular singer at the time, Ofra Haza (Bat-Sheva Ofra Haza-Ashkenazi). Our repertoire had to include at least one Lithuanian and one Russian song, as well as one about the [Communist] Party or some similar context... We remember that the editor of the Kaunas regional newspaper would pressure us, saying that we didn't have enough patriotic songs... But we wanted to enjoy what we sang, so we didn't sing about Lenin.

From an interview with Batya and Boris Gomberg, 2018³¹

³⁰ Kauno žydų saviveiklos 50-metis, 7–9.

³¹ Atminties biuras: B. ir B. Gomberg. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2018. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-b-ir-b-gomberg>

In the late 1950s, the name of Kaunas was made famous throughout Lithuania and the Soviet Union by Nechama Lifshitz (Lifšicaitė). Born in Kaunas in 1927, Lifshitz and her family fled to Uzbekistan during the Second World War. After the war, she returned to Lithuania and graduated from the State Conservatory and soon began performing at the Vilnius Philharmonic and Kaunas State Musical Drama Theatre. In addition to her operatic career, Lifshitz also performed Yiddish songs. In 1959 and 1960, she was sent to perform abroad to prove to the West that the Yiddish culture was not being suppressed in the Soviet Union. Her concert tours took her to Austria, Belgium, and France. Two records of her songs were released in 1960 and 1961. Lifshitz's songs were important for the promotion of a Jewish identity. In the mid-1960s, she became a symbol of the Soviet Jewish struggle for the right to return to their historic homeland. Lifshitz eventually emigrated to Israel in 1969.³²

Nechama Lifshitz brought rejuvenating national and spiritual sustenance to Jews longing for their own culture in Lithuania and

³² Justas Stončius. *Antisemitizmas sovietinėje Lietuvoje*, 91–92.

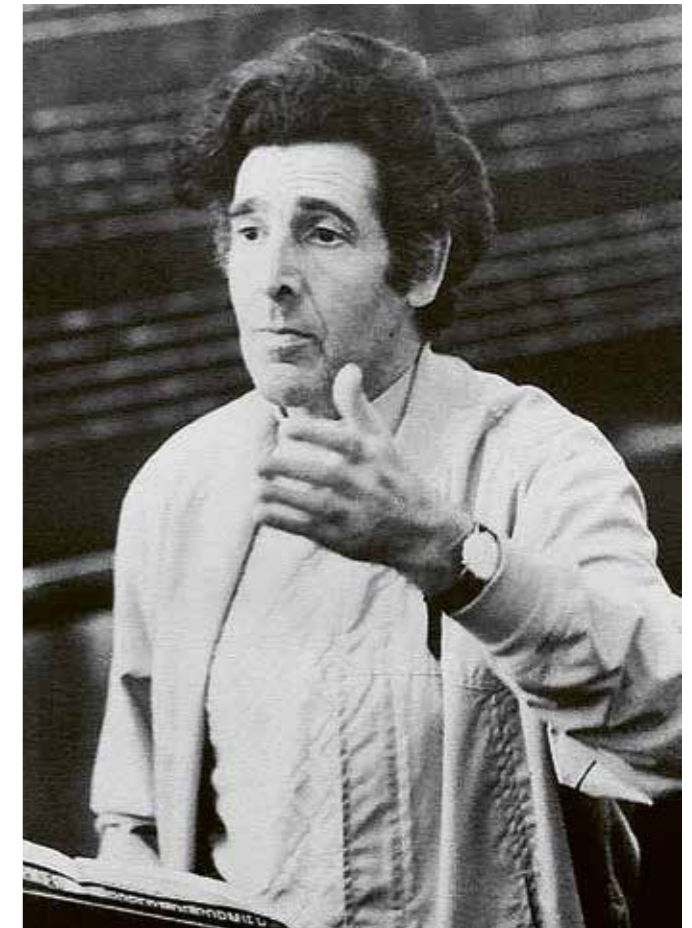


Nechama Lifshitz. 1960. Personal archive of Roza Litay

*throughout the Soviet Union... The songs sung by Nechama (whose name means "comfort" in Yiddish) expressed the profound experiences and hopes of Jews in the Soviet Union – they would shock and inspire.*³³

Another prominent name in the musical life of Lithuania in the late 1950s was Herman Perelstein, who had begun studying piano at the Kaunas Conservatory in 1936 and was deported with his family to Siberia by the Soviets in the summer of 1941. After

³³ Cited from Sigita Žemaitytė. *Žydų tapatumas sovietinėje Lietuvoje (XX a. 8–9 dešimtmečiai)*. Magistro baigiamasis darbas. Kaunas, 2012, 23.



Herman Perelstein. 1970s. Archives of the Ažuoliukas Choir

returning to Lithuania in 1956, Perelstein continued his studies at the State Conservatory. In 1959, he established the "Ažuoliukas" (Little Oak) boys' choir in Vilnius, an ensemble that continues to make Lithuania famous around the world today. Perelstein emigrated to the United States in 1979.³⁴ Between 1929 and 1939, Perelstein lived in apartment No. 5 at Vytauto Prospektas 58, a building constructed by the founders of the interwar Litex fabric company, M. Posviansky and H. Klis.

³⁴ Vytautas Jakelaitis. Hermanas Perelšteinas, 2010. *Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija*. <https://www.vle.lt/Straipsnis/Hermanas-Perelšteinas-3565>



ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

In the late 1960s, Kaunas began to see the emergence of free ideas promoted by youth culture. Music groups embraced by young audiences began to offer alternatives to Soviet pop music and the first hippies appeared. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, perhaps the best known so-called informal hippy youth group emerged, known by the name “Company”. The group’s cultural awareness was influenced by the pantomime theatre of Modris

Tenisons. The group included Arkadijus Vinokuras, a member of the Modris Tenisons theatre company.

As hippies in Kaunas, we clearly understood that all of what we were doing, our lifestyle, had to be visible. We didn’t hide. And that was our strength. Was this a deliberate decision? Initially, I think not. When the KGB and the Communist Youth League began to



Arkadijus Vinokuras and members of Company in Kaunas. c. 1969–1970.
Personal archive of Kristupas Petkūnas

take provocative acts against us – arrests, threats – we realized our significance. We drew courage and faith from each other, from The Doors, The Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, from broadcasts by the Voice of America, Radio Liberty, Radio Sweden, Radio Luxembourg, as well as from Soviet films that criticized “the rotten bourgeois way of life”. We saw that. We dreamed of what they were ridiculing. . . . Our opposition to Soviet reality didn’t appear out of nowhere. We were from Kaunas, citizens of Lithuania’s provisional capital. . . . The hippy movement was spontaneous, unorganized, and it also had a national undertone, even though our ranks were truly

*cosmopolitan: Lithuanians, Jews, Russians, Poles. . . . In 1972, we established the first hippy commune in the Soviet empire. We were arrested after Romas Kalanta set himself on fire. They demanded that we cooperate, but we refused.*³⁵

Such youth groups were monitored and compromised by agents of the Soviet security forces.

³⁵ *Laisvės proveržiai sovietiniame Kaune: nuo slaptos pogrindžio iki atviro protesto.* Ed. Rimantė Tamoliūnienė. Kaunas, 2007, 83.



The band Raganiai. Nathan Gitkind (front), Vladimir Kochegarov (seated), Anatoly Goldstein (standing at left) and Jacob Gitkind. Kaunas. c. 1970. Personal archive of Nathan Gitkind

On May 14, 1972, as a protest against the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Romas Kalanta set himself on fire in a park next to the Music Theatre. Demonstrations in the city center followed on May 18–19. 402 participants were arrested and eight were later sentenced to prison. In May 1973, a partial military curfew was imposed in Kaunas to prevent any commemoration of the first anniversary of Kalanta's death. Arkadijus Vinokuras recalled those events:

I was arrested in the autumn [of 1972] and, after a five-minute "trial", was driven to the KGB building in Kaunas. There, in the basement, I was asked by Major Aleinikov why I, being Jewish, was fighting for a free Lithuania? I replied that Lithuania was my homeland. That freedom for Lithuania was also freedom for all the nations in this prison. He commanded that I be shoved into an iron closet. There wasn't enough room in there for even a single person. They threw a box onto the floor and beat me with batons. Then they left me to stand there. After a while, they beat me again. After a few hours, they pulled me out and shaved my head. I happened to get a good police officer. He said that he'd heard of me, so he would cut my hair nicely. And that's what he did. I was locked up for a month. They kept me in the dark for three days in a cell meant for twelve people, then they let in 29 convicts and turned on a 500-watt light bulb. It was on day and night. They arrested me again on Kalanta's anniversary in 1973. I was held at the military hospital. Every month they'd give me eye drops, so I could only see shadows.³⁶

Another Company member was Nathan Gitkind who shared his memory of the autumn of 1970:

In Kaunas, we can definitely feel how young people from the hippy movement are coming together into small groups, but nearly all of them are still underground. Most guys cover their hair with their collars and girls don't openly show off their long dresses, vibrant colors, or flowers in their hair; to put it gently, society isn't very tolerant – not of long hair, nor flowers in your hair, nor gathering together freely, nor for any loud, sober laughter in public... Everything happens out of the public eye, small groups get together in basements, attics, or just in their rooms (especially where parents are more tolerant) decorated with Beatles, Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Frank Zappa posters, and forget about the world and listen to music. There is a lively big beat life in Kaunas... Company began to gather in the City Garden last autumn. It was cold and wet outside. We drank insane amounts of coffee at the Milk Café there, but we'd have to eventually

give up our tables to other customers, after all. Even when we didn't have our own "space" – which was most often the case – the hopelessly freezing Company would still not want to disperse. Hanging out together was not just about chatting, arguing, or making friendly fun of each other; hanging out meant forgetting where we lived, rising above our daily lives – you could describe all of it by a concept we didn't even now back then: "living in a virtual world."³⁷

Nathan Gitkind was also the drummer for the subculture cult rock band Raganiai in early 1969. From 1969 to 1971, the band also included Visvaldas Žalnierius on vocals, Jacob Gitkind as guitar soloist, Vladimir Kochegarov on guitar and vocals, and Anatoly Goldstein on bass guitar and vocals.³⁸

Raganiai got its first serious recognition in 1970 when the band received an invitation to perform in an international ballroom dancing competition. Music for ballroom dancing was performed back then by the Aitvarai band along with conductor Misha Kantzer's wind section from the Orbita night club.

Saulutė was a students' café set up in a dormitory building in the student residential complex, in front of the Automation Engineering Faculty. That was where the first disco nights were held in Kaunas. It's important to mention that these weren't the usual discotheques. It probably wasn't even a disco at all (even if we called it that), but more an exploration and listening to albums of various kinds of rock (hard rock, art rock, psychedelic rock, etc.) . . . Only people we knew and trusted were allowed in. Raganiai always used to get a few tickets, so we could bring our friends from Company. At the same time, Company members were always very welcome, because their dancing style lent the discotheque an illusion of an almost forbidden world.³⁹

Raganiai would soon have to move from the Radioelectronics Faculty to a cultural center run by the Janonis paper factory. Many doors had been closed because of restrictions imposed by the regime and the band eventually disbanded in the summer of 1972.⁴⁰ But Raganiai reformed in Israel in 2001 and continues to play today.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

³⁸ Mindaugas Peleckis. Pirmoji diskoteka Lietuvoje ir visoje TSRS: Kauno hipiai, Raganiai, Company, Smūtkeliai, Nuogi ant slenksčio, 2011–05–04. <https://www.suru.lt/pirmoji-diskoteka-lietuvoje-ir-visoje-tsrs/#more-25461>

³⁹ *Laisvės proveržiai sovietiniame Kaune*, 95.

⁴⁰ Mindaugas Peleckis. Pirmoji diskoteka Lietuvoje.

³⁶ Ibid., 85.

ZAHOR – REMEMBER

For many Jews living in Soviet Lithuania, regardless of their political or ideological convictions or their views on religion and the Yiddish language, the Hebrew pledge of *zahor* (remember) became a core part of their identity.⁴¹

When I returned to Kaunas, I started a new life – with all I could muster. I couldn't forget what I had lived through. That was impossible. I thought to myself: I was only a child, but I was never afraid of anything. No job. For one year I cleaned toilets in Kaunas. There was no other choice – I wanted to eat. I didn't want to just sit and wait for something to happen. I began to try, to study – there had been a break of four years, after all. I took the entrance exams remotely. I was accepted into the Kaunas Polytechnic Institute (the Kaunas Technological University today – Ed.) and I graduated. I worked in Šančiai, at the Požėla confectionary, then at a machine tools factory. I created a family. At home, I tried to tell them about everything I'd endured. So that my children would know. And everywhere I can, I speak about it.

Interview with Roza Gapanavičiūtė Bloch, 2020⁴²

Some Jews felt a moral obligation to gather at least once a year at mass killing sites to honor victims of the Holocaust. But the Soviet regime carefully monitored such commemorations and often banned them. In 1971, on the thirtieth anniversary of the “Great Action”, the Chicago Jewish weekly *The Sentinel* wrote:

*The present rulers in Lithuania are trying to erase any signs of this monstrous deed. The handful of remnant Jews who still live in Kaunas are prohibited from commemorating this day and are being arrested on charges of hooliganism for appearing at the site on the anniversary. But the Lithuanian Jews in the free world will never forget this day and will keep reminding the world of this massacre in the hope that maybe one day the world will learn to live in peace and harmony with one another.*⁴³

41 Lietuvos žydai už geležinės uždangos. Kilnojamosios parodos katalogas. Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, Vilnius, 2014, 7.

42 Atminties biuras: R. Bloch. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2020. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-r-bloch>

43 William W. Mishell. 30th Anniversary of Massacre of Lithuanian Jews on Oct. 28. *The Sentinel*, October 14, 1971, 39.

The restriction of culture and religion pursued by the Soviet government in the 1960s and 1970s had a profound effect on the Kaunas Jewish community. Human rights violations and antisemitic propaganda directed against Israel and Zionism drove the Jewish community to fight for the right to emigrate to their historic homeland.

Protests by Lithuania's Jews resonated around the world. The campaign to win the right to emigrate to Israel included petitions, memoranda, and letters to Soviet governing bodies and to countries in the West. In 1971, thirty-two Jews from Kaunas, Vilnius, and Riga began a hunger strike in Moscow.

*For 10 days we have been going from reception room to reception room. . . . In a sign of protest against the arbitrary rule of the authorities we declared a hunger strike on June 22, while being in the Central Telegraphic Office in Moscow. This is the second day of the hunger strike declared by us, but we haven't yet received the expected answer. We are in the Telegraph Office day and night. We do not sleep. Among us are 17 women, some of them with small children. We shall insist on our lawful right. We want to live in the State of Israel.*⁴⁴

Soviet authorities suppressed this Jewish protest in Moscow with the threat of sanctions. Despite various restrictions on Jewish emigration, however, the great majority of Jews were able to leave Lithuania between 1967 and 1972, most of whom left for Israel.⁴⁵ By 1980, approximately 10,000 Lithuanian Jews had left the country.⁴⁶

The Kaunas Jewish community shrunk as a result of the large wave of Jewish emigration, a decline that was particularly noticeable in the city's synagogue. The synagogue committee chairman commented on the situation with regret: “We see that we'll soon have to close the synagogue. Few people visit – mostly the elderly. It's a shame that those who do come to pray don't know

44 U Thant Given Text of Plea From Jews on Hunger Strike in Moscow. *The Sentinel*, July 01, 1971, 3.

45 Linas Tatarūnas. Lietuvos žydų nacionalinis judėjimas už teisę išvykti į Izraelį, 2001. <http://genocid.lt/Leidyba/11/linas.htm>

46 Vitalija Stravinskienė. Demografiniai pokyčiai Lietuvoje 1944–1989 m. (statistinis aspektas). *Istorija*, t. 103, nr. 3, 2016, 38.



A portion of the wall display of *Kiemo galerija* (Courtyard Gallery, created by Vytenis Jakas). Kaunas, Photograph: Darius Petreikis

how.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the remaining Jews of Kaunas continued to practice their faith in their own private spaces, attempting to preserve traditions without drawing any undue attention from Soviet authorities.⁴⁸

My uncle lived on Gardino Street. He learned how to bake matzah at home – he had some sort of machine for it. He'd turn it on before

Passover – Jewish Easter – so that all the children in the family would stand watch over it. The doors would be closed and we'd bake matzah. The entire family would gather for the holiday. We'd celebrate from start to finish – with prayers and all the traditions.

Interview with Bella Shirin, 2017⁴⁹

47 LCVA, f. R-181, ap. 3, b. 78, l. 65.

48 Ibid., l. 45.

49 Atminties biuras: B. Shirin. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2017. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-b-shirin/>

JEWIS IN KAUNAS AFTER THE RESTORATION OF LITHUANIAN INDEPENDENCE



Kiemo galerija (by Vytenis Jakas, 2014), wall fragment, Kaunas.
Photograph: Darius Petreikis

The start of reforms and the emergence of the Sąjūdis national reform movement in the late 1980s also made it possible for the rise of a Jewish national rebirth in Lithuania. New forms of organized association were explored. On March 5, 1989, the Lithuanian Jewish Cultural Society was established in Vilnius. The opening of the society's Kaunas chapter soon followed, inaugurated at a meeting at the Kaunas Labor Union Culture Hall with over 300 attendees. A chapter council was elected and V. Jelinas was appointed president. Jelinas was later replaced by Markas Zingeris.¹

An exhibition showcasing the Jewish culture opened in 1988. Titled "Lithuanian Jewish Art in the 17th–20th Centuries", it was the first event of its kind in Kaunas since World War II. The exhibition, organized by Emanuelis Zingeris at the Kaunas Painting Gallery, explored Jewish art for the first time in nearly four decades.²

The restoration of the Lithuanian National Olympic Committee on December 11, 1988 also paved the way for the revival of the Maccabi Sports Club. Eighty-five delegates and more than two hundred guests from around Lithuania participated in the club's restorative conference in Vilnius on January 8, 1989. The reconstitution of the Maccabi Club sought to revive prewar Jewish athletic traditions and allow its athletes to take part in international Jewish sports competitions.³

In 1989, we unexpectedly left for the 13th World Maccabiah Games in Israel. There were about 50 or 60 of us. We competed in football, field and table tennis, swimming, and chess. We wanted to represent Lithuania, even if the organizers wanted to show that we had come as the Soviet team.

Interview with Gercas Žakas, 2018⁴

1 Lietuvos žydai švenčia 30-ąją Chanuką. <https://www.lzb.lt/2018/12/01/lietuvas-zydai-svencia-30-aja-chanuka>

2 *Lietuva litvakų kūryboje*. Ed. Vilma Gradinskaitė, 174.

3 Gintaras Nenartavičius. „Makabi“ klubo atstovai didžiuojasi pirmieji žengę su trispalve. <https://www.lrytas.lt/sportas/startai/2014/09/20/news/-makabi-klubo-atstovai-didzijuojasi-pirmieji-zenge-su-trispalve-4451659/>

4 Atminties biuras: G. Žakas. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2018. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-g-zakas>



Kiemo galerija (by Vytenis Jakas, 2016), Kaunas. Photograph: Darius Petreikis

Lithuania's Maccabi team that marched in the opening ceremonies of the 13th Maccabiah Games in 1989 was the first Lithuanian delegation to participate under a Lithuanian flag in a competition recognized by the International Olympic Committee.⁵

Since the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, several Jewish communities remain active in Kaunas: the Kaunas Jewish Community (Gercas Žakas, President), the Kaunas Jewish Religious Community (Mauša Bairakas, President), and the Kaunas Hasidic Synagogue Religious Community (Iseris Šreibergas, Chairman). The

Kaunas Jewish Religious Community maintains the Kaunas Choral Synagogue, the only remaining active synagogue in Kaunas.⁶

The Kaunas Jewish Center was established in 2010 by William Stern, Rabbi Moshe Sheinfeld, and directed by Alex Minin. One of the center's goals is to help Jewish students and youth studying in Kaunas to preserve their identity.⁷ In 2017, the center organized the opening of a mikveh, a Jewish ritual bath.⁸

6 *Litvakų peizažas*. Kauno miesto žemėlapis. Kaunas In, 2018. <https://kaunas-tika.lt/map/the-litvak-landscape>

7 Kauno žydų centras. Apie. <http://kaunasjewish.eu/lt/apie/>

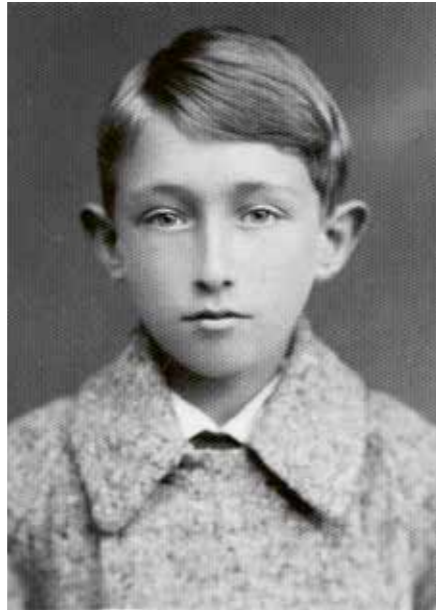
8 Kauno žydų centras. Mikve. <http://kaunasjewish.eu/lt/mikve-lt/>

5 Vytautas Žeimantas. „Makabi“ žaidynės. Tokios sėkmės nesitikėjo. *Olimpinė panorama*, 2019 m. rugpjūtis, nr. 8, 27.

THE FATE OF KAUNASIANS



Riva and Vulf Vitkin. Kaunas. c. 1924



Joseph Vitkin. Kaunas. 1936



Riva's cousin Rivka Shmukler with her husband, poet Hirsh Osheroovich. Kaunas. c. 1930

THE VITKIN FAMILY

Vulf and Riva Vitkin, both born in Kaunas, were well educated, multilingual, and observed Jewish traditions, and their home was always open to guests. Before the outbreak of World War II, Vulf Vitkin worked as a technical director at the Cotton hosiery factory.

When Lithuania regained control of Vilnius, my brother, who was never inclined to do his homework, suddenly disappeared. Along with three small boys, barely teenagers. All the mothers were worried: "The children didn't come home at night! Where did they go?" There was great concern at home. The other boys were Lithuanians. When they returned, my terribly frightened brother met me in the courtyard and asked that I help him sneak into the house undetected. It turns out they had gone off to have a look at Vilnius!

He had gone to our grandfather in Žaliakalnis, who always spoiled us, and asked him for some litas for the trip to Vilnius... And he gave him some.

When the first bombs began dropping, my father would try to calm us down by saying they were only maneuvers. No one had expected the war to start so suddenly. My parents didn't have enough time to get onto a train or even a truck to flee to the East. We withdrew with the so-called Red Army. My father got a horse and carriage from somewhere... But we didn't manage to escape. We had stopped at some barn to rest and my father told us there was no point. The Germans were already ahead of us and we would have to turn back. My parents were afraid of returning home.



Fruma Vitkin (center) with her rescuer Helene Holzman and her daughter Margarita. Kaunas. c. 1959²

After the outbreak of war, Riva, Vulf and their son Joseph and daughter Fruma were forced to live in the Kaunas ghetto, not far from the entrance. Fruma was saved, but her parents and younger brother were killed during the liquidation of the ghetto.

I and Zhenya walked from Kleboniškis along Jonavos Street. The ghetto was on the opposite side. And that was probably the day my parents died – when the bunkers were detonated, and the entire ghetto was set on fire. We were walking and I suddenly saw the ghetto on fire. I knew that my parents and brother were there... I asked Zhenya later: "Did you notice anything as we were walking and the fire was burning on the other side? Did I even stop or say anything?" She replied: "Nothing." I was that well-trained [not to give myself away]...



Fruma Kučinskienė (Vitkin). Kaunas. 2019. Photograph: Marc Wilson and Kaunas 2022

After the war, Fruma Vitkin lived with what became her second family, Helene Holzman and her daughter Margarita.

Helene Holzman was my savior and my adopted mother. I called her Aunt Lena. I was in hiding with two other girls, but Helene took me in. I would later say to her: "Aha! You picked me!" And she would answer: "Not because I liked you more, but because you looked the most in need. More than the others." We were like one family. This bond was a gift of life, for me and for Gretutė [Margarita].

Interview with Fruma Kučinskienė, 2017¹

¹ Atminties biuras: F. Kučinskienė. Kaunas 2022.

² Photographs from the personal archive of Fruma Kučinskienė.



Gerta Urchs and Moshe Zarchi in Germany. 1930s

THE ZARCHI FAMILY

Moses (Moshe) Zarchi, born in Ukmergė, and Gerta Urchs of Germany met in Düsseldorf am Rhein, but married in 1934 in Kaunas, when marriage between Jews and Germans was prohibited in Germany.

My father went to school in Ukmergė and completed his studies in Kaunas. After graduating he immediately left for Germany, to Giessen, where he studied philosophy and political science. He later continued his studies in Basel, where he defended his doctoral dissertation in 1926. He left for Düsseldorf in 1928. There was an advertising firm there called Industrie Atelier, owned by Jews. My father was hired there to head the firm's literature section. My mother was already employed there. She was a very good set designer. That's where they met.

The couple returned to Kaunas several years later, where Moses worked at the editorial office of three Yiddish language newspapers on Vytauto Prospektas. Their daughter Julijana was born in 1938.

Right up until her death, I was what connected her to Germany. But what was Germany to me? I could never travel there. Traveling was prohibited in the Soviet years. Especially for those who spoke foreign languages. And my mother always spoke with me in German. It was my first language. I learned Lithuanian later. After we were deported to Tajikistan, I learned Russian. I was a little piece of her homeland, even if I had never been to that homeland.



Gerta ir Moshe with their daughter Julijana in Ukmergė. 1938⁴

In the first days of the war, Moses returned to Ukmergė, where he died with his relatives. After the Nazis occupied Kaunas, Julijana was confined in the ghetto as a Jew. After the war, she, now considered a German, was exiled with her mother to Tajikistan for many years, only returning to Lithuania in 1963. Julijana's mother never stopped longing for her native Düsseldorf, which she never saw again.

We lived in a house made of clay, called a "kibitka". We had a small room near the hospital. All it had was a bed. There was no window, just a piece of glass. Later we moved to a small storeroom where they'd been keeping a horse. They took the horse outside and we cleaned up and lived there. It smelled, of course... There was no window there either. We never had a roof of our own, until we met a family of Ukrainian Germans with whom we got along...



Julijana Zarchi. Kaunas. 2019.
Photograph: Marc Wilson and Kaunas 2022

Everyone said that this large German woman with her little child would die first. She didn't know any other languages, nor was she used to Tadjik farming. But she somehow managed to survive and save me. I think how unsettled my mother must have been in that foreign land... And then forced into those rail cars... It was already foreign enough for her in Lithuania, but then came exile...

Interview with Julijana Zarchi, 2017³

³ Atminties biuras: J. Zarchi. Kaunas 2022. Interviu su tautinėmis Kauno bendruomenėmis, 2017. <https://www.atmintiesvietos.lt/lt/kaunas-2/interviu-su-tautinemis-kauno-bendruomenemis/atminties-biuras-j-zarchi/>

⁴ Photographs from the personal archive of Julijana Zarchi.



Bella Shirin. Kaunas. 1949

THE SHIFRIS FAMILY

Roza Danel (Danelytė) of Pakruojis and Iser Shifris from the village of Tryškiai near Telšiai met before the war. After enduring the horrors of the Holocaust – the ghetto and concentration camps in Germany – they returned to Kaunas.

My father loved prewar Kaunas. He always talked about it. At home, we always used the prewar names for all the streets, even during the Soviet times. There was never any Stalino Prospektas [the renamed Laisvės Alėja – Ed.] – my father never uttered that name.

Roza had a beautiful voice, but her daughter Bella, born in 1946, became her whole world. Iseris repaired and sold watches.

I wanted to celebrate Lithuanian holidays, too. When I was eight, I said that I wanted a Christmas tree, like all the other children. I was told: "Jewish people don't put up Christmas trees." And I replied: "I want a tree because I'm a person, not because I'm a Jewish child." They said no. I declared that I wouldn't eat. My parents smiled. I loved to eat. I was chubby. They didn't believe me. I got up in the morning and they gave me sandwiches for school. And I so wanted to eat them... But no – I wanted a tree more. I brought the sandwiches home. That evening, I heard my mother say to my father: "The child is going to faint. It's not good, this not eating all day..." And for Jews, children were everything. It was important that they eat and finish their entire plate. I woke up in the morning and didn't eat breakfast. I started walking to school. I was getting dizzy already. On my walk back from school I thought to myself – this is bad... But when I got home, there was a tree! With lights and ornaments! It was one of the most wonderful days. One I will never forget. I won. I defended my rights. And maybe that's when I understood that, if you want something, you can achieve it.

Thinking back on postwar Kaunas, Bella remembers a bustling Laisvės Alėja and life as part of a community:

Kaunas was still full of Jews, and all of them were on Laisvės Alėja. Our home was always full of my parents' friends – Jews and Lithuanians. The Jewish people took more joy out of life. Despite all they had endured, they were more open. But Lithuanians were different then, too. Perhaps people in harder times had more in common with one another than they do now. Neighbours would help one another, whatever they needed – a doctor or a pair of shoes... One time a neighbour of ours fell ill and urgently needed



Roza Danelytė with her daughter Bella. Kaunas. 1950

Iser Shifris with his daughter Bella. Kaunas. 1949⁶

Bella Shirin. Kaunas. 2019. Photograph: Vilmantas Raupelis and Kauno diena

special medicine from America. My father wrote to our relatives and they sent him some. Helping each other was my family's mission.

But my father only went to synagogue on the holidays, because he wasn't a believer. Before the war, he was very devout – but afterward, no longer. But he'd go to synagogue for the traditions. He'd purchased a seat at the Choral Synagogue for the entire year. I would go with him.

After considerable effort, the family finally secured permission to emigrate to Israel in 1963.

When we got permission to leave... There was great joy at first. I'm going to go and see my cousin. But later... I knew I was leaving for good... That I won't be coming back. This was not like going to

Palanga or to the Black Sea. But maybe when you're a child you don't think about it too much. All that preparing to leave, saying our goodbyes... Crowds of people came. Lithuanians and Jews – everyone visited us. What a miracle! Tell us how you did it, tell us where, how, what to do? That's how we left. In December. What came next was no longer Kaunas...

But Kaunas remained in Bella's heart forever. She moved back in 2016.

Iš interviu su Bella Shirin, 2017⁵

5 Atminties biuras: B. Shirin.

6 Photographs from the personal archive of Bella Shirin.



Leonidas Donskis. European Parliament. 2013

LEONIDAS DONSKIS

Leonidas Donskis (1962–2016) was a philosopher, essayist, cultural critic, Member of the European Parliament, Vice President of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, and the recipient of numerous national and international prizes and awards. The many fields researched by Donskis included contemporary social, political, and cultural philosophy, society, and culture.

Donskis, often called a “wandering academic”, taught philosophy and conducted research at universities in Estonia, Finland, Great Britain, Hungary, Sweden, and the United States. He returned to Lithuania in 2002 and chose to teach at Vytautas Magnus University. He established deep roots in Kaunas and advocated for the embrace of modern thought and greater tolerance.

Donskis’ father, Shimon Donskis of Butrimonys, met his future wife Joana Cukermanaitė in Kaunas. At the time, the elder

Donskis was already practicing medicine in Klaipėda and it was not easy to convince a young, beautiful woman who loved her native city to move with him to the Baltic coast.

My mother grew up in Kaunas in a mixed family. Her father was Jewish and her mother – Polish. My grandfather Moisey Tzukerman was sentenced to death for speculating in gold and diamonds. [A currency reform law had been introduced by Nikita Khrushchev in 1961, imposing the death penalty on anyone seeking to profit from currency and gold speculation – Ed.] He was executed in 1961. At the time, my mother was already pregnant with me and she wasn’t sure that I would be born alive after all she had endured.⁷

⁷ Leonidą Donskį kalbina Aistė Stonytė. *Mes – moterys!* „Lietuvos ryto“ mėnesinis žurnalas, 2006 m. rugpjūtis, 52.



During the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Lithuania. Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus and Leonidas Donskis. 2006. Photograph: Džoja Gunda Barysaite

The first candid conversation between father and son about their family history happened when Leonidas Donskis turned 27. Wanting to protect his sensitive son, Leonidas’ father had long avoided the subject.

In 1989, Leonidas’ father was given the chance to visit his relatives from Butrimonys who had moved to America. . . . And that’s where, in America, father and son had their first candid talk about what had happened in Butrimonys during the Second World War, about his childhood, about their murdered relatives, and about those who were saved. Of two thousand Jews in that small town, only eleven survived, four of whom were from Leonidas’ family: his grandmother, grandfather, and two brothers. I’m amazed: Leonidas had been a voracious reader of books since the age of four. And can you imagine that it was possible under the Soviets to conceal information on the massacre of Jews? The dead were simply referred to as victims of war.

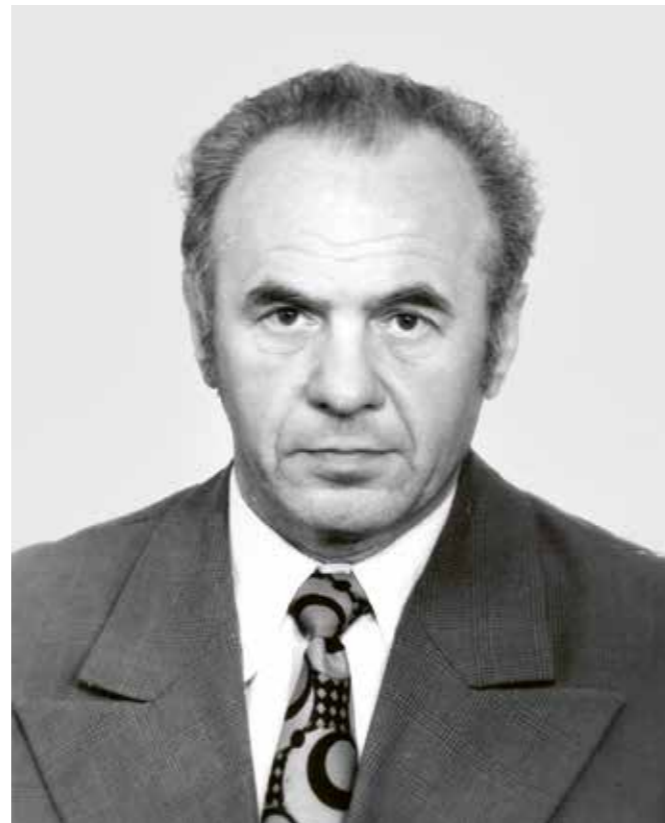
Leonidas later learned that his father’s family had been saved by Adelė and Juozas Buiniekas, who lived in the village of Paliesiai, and by the Andriuškevičius family and Ščiuckas family, who were Tatars. Leonidas’ father always spent time with and cared for the Ščiuckas family. Later, his father began speaking more openly with Leonidas about how difficult life was during the war, about the starvation, and how his parents would stand in the barn, in a slurry pit, ready to end their lives because of the hunger.⁸

Despite their family’s tragic history, Leonidas and his brother Robertas grew up in a friendly, loving, and open-minded family. Remembering Donskis’ family, his wife Jolanta recalled:

⁸ Jolanta Donskienė: „Mūsų gyvenimo būdas reikalavo būti vieningiems kaip kumštis. Rėmėmės tik vienas į kitą.“ <https://www.moteris.lt/leid-ai/g-50944-jolanta-donskiene-musu-gyvenimo-budas-reikalavo-buti-vieningiems-kaip-kumstis-rememes-tik-vienas-i-kita>



Leonidas with his mother Joana. 1966



Shimon Donskis

I became part of Leonidas' wonderful family – so Italian in temperament, and so full of Jewish humor. There was a strong tradition in his parents' home of sitting down on the weekends at a table set with a starched, white tablecloth, beautiful china, and covered with all sorts of dishes and several cakes. Leonidas' mother made very delicious food.

I would watch Leonidas' father's temperament and the Yiddish culture I knew from childhood. He expressed his joy for life every single day, every minute. It was the joy of someone who had survived, who had persevered. I found a way to understand it: He had emigrated from interwar Lithuania to Soviet Lithuania, and he had emigrated from Yiddish culture to the reality of today.⁹

Reflecting on the dramatic history of Lithuania's Jews, Leonidas Donskis observed:

It's hard for me to imagine Lithuania without the songs of Danielius Dolaskis, without Jewish singers, without Rafael Chwoles, without so many talented Jews who always loved Lithuania as their own country. And there were patriots, high-ranking political figures who were very important in international politics, such as the lawyer Jokūbas Robinzonas. Lithuania lost its own sons and daughters, members of its family, people whom I would call Lithuanians of Jewish decent, or Lithuanians of a different ethnic background.

Yes, there were differences. Under the Tsar, many Jews in the shtetls and small Lithuanian towns spoke Yiddish and Russian – not everyone spoke Lithuanian. But that situation changed in Smetona-era Lithuania, especially in Kaunas, and the facts tell us that, despite

9 Ibid.



Leonidas and his wife Jolanta. 2005. Photograph: Vaida Baškienė¹²

everything, Jews and Lithuanians soon began to come closer together. It's like in that famous sermon by John Donne: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." Lithuania lost a part of itself. Everything that serves the welfare and talent of my country, that promotes its name, is precious, and the loss of that is a tragedy for all of us.¹⁰

Donskis believed that culture and art will help us remember the past.

Human life is vulnerable and fragile, much like our ability to remember humanity's tragedies. When the final witnesses of the Holocaust

leave us, we will face a difficult challenge: How do we think about the unthinkable and speak of the unspeakable? How do we do this when the living testimony of the great crime in human history is vanishing and receding before our eyes?

In other words, culture can become a way of serving as humanity's memory. The great artists writing about, portraying, or individualizing their contemporaries in some other way become the conscious extension of another's existence. . . . Because there are things we must never be allowed to forget. If I forget you, whose face and eyes I have seen, then woe to me, for I have forsaken humanity.¹¹

10 L. Donskis: per žydų genocidą Lietuva neteko brolių ir seserų. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/25842/l-donskis-per-zydu-genocida-lietuva-neteko-broliu-ir-seseru>

11 Jei aš Tave užmiršiu... Tekstas skirtas Antano Sutkaus parodos „IN MEMORIAM“ katalogui, 2016. <http://www.donskis.lt/lt/11/2612/jei-aa-tave-uamiraiu>

12 Photographs from the personal archive of Jolanta Donskienė.



Irena Veisaitė at Jenny Kagan's exhibition *Out of Darkness* in Halifax (UK). 2016. Photograph: Jenny Kagan

IRENA VEISAITĖ

Irena Veisaitė (1928–2020) was a Germanist, theatre and literary critic, cultural activist, and the long-serving council president of the Open Lithuania Foundation. She was the recipient of numerous national and international awards for her active contribution to cultural and public life. Veisaitė was born in Kaunas, to Sofija Štromaitė-Veisienė and Izidorius Veisas. She survived the Holocaust and the Nazi and Soviet occupations, living to see the restoration and consolidation of Lithuania's independence.

Veisaitė referred to her parents, who shaped the fundamental values of her life, as Europeans.

My parents respected traditions, but they didn't follow them. There are many ways to describe my parents' relationship with European

culture. For example, they didn't dress like Jews, but like Europeans; they received a secular education and spoke many languages. . . . We weren't a typical Jewish family; we didn't follow religious traditions and we were open to the world.¹³

As a child, Irena Veisaitė spent one year receiving treatment at a sanatorium in Switzerland, where she learned to speak German, which became her third language, alongside Russian and Lithuanian.

Of that time, I remember secondary school. They're interesting, happy memories of childhood. All sorts of things happened. I was a student

¹³ Aurimas Švedas. *Irena Veisaitė. Gyvenimas turi būti skaidrus*. Vilnius, Aukso žuvys, 2016, 31.

at the Yiddish Sholem Aleichem Gymnasium, but I didn't know Yiddish, only German. I remember how my classmates who were native Yiddish speakers would tease me, calling me "the little intellectual".¹⁴

Veisaitė's parents divorced in 1938. Her father spent one year in Belgium and then departed for the United States. In the summer of 1941, her mother was executed at the Seventh Fort. Barely ten years old, Irena was confined in the Kaunas ghetto, where she and her grandparents survived the "Great Action", when the Nazis transported nearly ten thousand people to the Ninth Fort and shot them the next day.

All Jews were ordered out of their homes – anyone found would be shot. We stood in Demokratų Square from six o'clock in the morning. We were separated into two groups: those who would live, and those who would die. The good side was on the right, the bad – on the left. I was there with my grandparents. They had a very hard time walking and both had high blood pressure. My turn came. My fate was decided by Helmut Rauca, the head of the Kaunas ghetto. I held my grandparents close and looked straight into Rauca's eyes. I heard him say that I had beautiful eyes, and he ordered me to step to the right. I had so hypnotized him that he probably didn't notice my grandparents. That's how we stayed alive. I know that I had a supernatural power back then.¹⁵

Irena's grandmother died in 1942, and her grandfather was shot at the Ninth Fort during the "Children's Action" in March 1944. In 1943, with the help of her parents' friends, Juozas and Onutė Strimaitė, Veisaitė escaped the ghetto. Given forged documents by Feliksas Streigys, the principal of the Marijampolė High School, Irena took the surname Streigyte. Shortly thereafter, Irena met her guardian and second mother, Stefanija Ladigienė, in Vilnius.

When I got there, she said that Jews had suffered a great injustice and she wanted to contribute, in however small a way, to their rescue. We ate some food, she showed me the room where I would be sleeping – it was her son Linas' room. She came to my room that night, kissed me, and made a sign of the cross on my forehead. I broke out in tears and

¹⁴ „Aš visada norėjau likti žmogumi.“ Prof. I. Veisaitės dešimtmečiai ir portretai. https://www.bernardinai.lt/as-visada-norejau-likti-zmogumi-prof-i-veisaites-desimtmečiai-ir-portretai/?fbclid=IwAR1o_YH3Lws_8gAWAKn_q97sS-fLZCAZxtwnyPiWlpSnP7-JQa3ha9tcj80M

¹⁵ „Kančia man duota tam, kad suprasčiau kitą.“ Pokalbis su Irena Veisaitė. https://nara.lt/lt/articles-lt/kancia-man-duota-tam-kad-suprasciau-kita-pokalbis-su-irena-veisaite?fbclid=IwAR2CXpkqjeT-XqObhDkjjK_m9R6xu9Y-npTr81zB2f37FnQO9p68N5DmLpl



In Vingio Park in Vilnius. 1947. Irena Veisaitė family archives

asked if she wasn't disgusted to be kissing a Jew. Then she broke out in tears and we talked until four in the morning. From then on, she became my Mamytė, my Mommie, and I her Black Irena, her daughter.¹⁶

Ladigienė was a socially active educator, a member of the Ateitis Lithuanian Catholic Youth Association, and the wife of General Kazys Ladiga, a veteran of Lithuania's Wars of Independence. She was arrested by the Soviets on March 14, 1946 and sentenced by the court to ten years in a prison camp and five years in enforced exile.

We said goodbye and she made the sign of the cross on all our heads – her daughters, son, and me – and quietly left. The KGB officer

¹⁶ Stefanijos Ladigienės pasirinkimas – gyventi dėl kitų. <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2018-05-06-siaures-mama-stefanija-ladigiene/>



Irena with her mother Sofija Veisienė. 1938. Kaunas. Irena Veisaitė family archives

stayed in the room and detained anyone who dropped by. He sat at our place for three days. . . . I remember the day of her trial: We were standing on Vrublevskio Street when I saw her. She asked the Red Army soldier who was guarding her to pass one of her braids to me, and an embroidered kerchief. I experienced one of the most horrible moments: when the person you love the most is being deported, and you can't help them. I couldn't control myself; I began to run after the chorny voron (black raven), that black truck they used to transport prisoners, and I called out in a voice I myself didn't even recognize.¹⁷

After the war, Veisaitė studied Lithuanian language and literature at Vilnius University, but constant harassment from the KGB

compelled her to leave to study in Moscow. After graduating, she returned to Lithuania.

When I returned, you won't believe it – I kissed the ground. I loved my country and its people; I had many friends here and saw myself living only in Lithuania. There was never any doubt that only here could I achieve something.¹⁸

Reflecting back on her life and difficult personal plight, Veisaitė wrote:

What also saved me from total despair was the human goodness and sacrifice I saw and encountered during that brutal time. I especially

17 „Aš visada norėjau likti žmogumi.“ Prof. I. Veisaitės dešimtmečiai ir portretai.

18 Ibid.



Irena Veisaitė at the Arvo Pärt Center in Estonia. 2020. Photograph: Jenny Kagan

remember what my mother had told me before she died, something I was only able to understand and value much later: Always live in truth and never seek revenge. I will never forget my saviors, the dear Bagdonavičius and Strimaitis families, my second mother Stefani-ja Paliulytė-Ladigienė, as well as Dr. Izidorius Rudaitis, Ms. Marcelė Kubiliūtė, and so many others. All of them risked their own lives and the lives of their children by saving me. I could write a poem about each one of them and today in Bernardine Church I bow my head in their memory once more. These people not only saved my life, but, no less importantly, they helped me avoid hatred, to never surrender to anger, and to have faith in people again.¹⁹

19 Irena Veisaitė. *Holokaustas mano gyvenime*. <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2008-10-13-irena-veisaite-holokaustas-mano-gyvenime/>

In 1974, Irena Veisaitė's first husband and her daughter Alina chose to emigrate. Veisaitė remained in Lithuania. Remembering this difficult decision, she didn't hesitate about her own mission:

The animosity between Lithuanians and Jews was and is very painful for me because I myself am an "authentic" Litvak, a Lithuanian Jew, or, if you will, a Lithuanian of Jewish decent. Both cultures are alive within me. What I mean is a mentality, first and foremost. If you can contribute, with love, to overcoming this animosity, to the Europeanizing of one's native land, then that is perhaps the most important reason that makes remaining in one's country worthwhile.^{20 21}

20 Aurimas Švedas. *Irena Veisaitė*, 253.

21 Ibid.

WALLS TELLING THE STORIES OF A CITY

The CityTelling Festival, organized by the Kaunas 2022 program since 2019, seeks to remember the vibrant life of the Jews of Kaunas and the many world-renowned sons and daughters of Kaunas who once lived here.¹ A street art program launched by the festival in 2020 has revived the memory of countless names, faces, and stories.

LEA GOLDBERG

PINE

*Here I will not hear the voice of the cuckoo.
Here the tree will not wear a cape of snow.
But it is here in the shade of these pines
my whole childhood reawakens.*

*The chime of the needles: Once upon a time –
I called the snow-space homeland,
and the green ice at the river's edge –
was the poem's grammar in a foreign place.*

*Perhaps only migrating birds know –
suspended between earth and sky –
the heartache of two homelands.*

*With you I was transplanted twice,
with you, pine trees, I grew –
roots in two disparate landscapes.²*

Lea Goldberg (1911–1970) was born in Kaunas and lived for a time at No. 18 Kęstučio Street (since demolished), almost in the exact spot where a mural created by Linas Kaziulionis is displayed. Goldberg is one of the most famous Jewish poets in the world, but she remains relatively unknown in her first homeland, Lithuania. But Lithuania left a deep impression on her life and work, profoundly influencing her own personality. Almost all of



¹ For more about the CityTelling Festival program and projects devoted to the memory of Jewish history see: www.istorijufestivalis.eu and www.atmintiesvietos.lt/kaunas2022

² Oren (transl. R. Tzvia Back). *Collected Poems [Yalkut Shirim]* Publ.: Iachdav/Writers Association, edited by Tuvia Rivner 1970. We are thankful to Ofrai Yeglin for the reference to the poem. <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/3405/auto/0/0/Lea-Goldberg/PINE/en/tile>



Lives Interrupted (by Vytenis Jakas, 2020). J. Janonio Street 2, Kačerginė. Photograph: Martynas Plepys

Goldberg's best-known poems celebrate Lithuania and would later become popular songs in Israel. The theme of two homelands, Lithuania and Israel, echoes throughout Goldberg's poetry.

Kaziulionis' mural, located in what is today a less than welcoming but still historically significant location, seeks to remind us of Goldberg's name and work.

LIFE INTERRUPTED: KAČERGINĖ

A work of street art by Vytenis Jakas was inspired by an authentic image photographed in Kačerginė before World War II. The photo captures a group of friends: Judah Zupovich, Hirsh Kadushin, Liolia Berman, one unidentified person, and Yasha Langleben. Some in the photo were prominent citizens of Kaunas who devoted their work and talents to their city and its history.

Juda Zupovitch (1916–1944) studied engineering in Kaunas. He joined a Zionist movement, where he met Hirsh Kadushin. After graduating, Zupovitch worked as an engineer and served as

a reserve officer in the Lithuanian military. He married Dita Katz in 1941. The couple lived in the building which today is home to the Kiamo Galerija, founded by artist Vytenis Jakas. During the Second World War, Zupovitch and his two brothers served as policemen in the Kaunas ghetto and actively supported the underground resistance movement there. Zupovitch was among several individuals who helped hide the ghetto archives, including Kadushin's photographs. Zupovitch was arrested in March 1944 and executed at the Ninth Fort.

Hirsh Tzvi Kadushin (later known as George Kadish, 1910–1997) recorded Nazi crimes with his homemade camera, taking over one hundred photographs of life in the Kaunas ghetto. Most of the images were captured through a hole in his coat. At the end of the war, as the Nazis began searching for Kadushin, he hid his archives within the ghetto. Because of Kadushin's efforts, the history of the Kaunas ghetto is perhaps the best documented in Europe. After the war, Kadushin changed his name to George Kadish ("kaddish" is an ancient Jewish prayer sequence, also recited for the dead). He emigrated to the West and lived



Home (by Laura Slavinskaitė, 2020). V. Augustausko Street 12, Kulautuva. Photograph: Andrius Aleksandravičius

for a time at the Landsberg refugee camp in Germany, where he photographed life there. He later left to the United States, where he lived until his death.

HOME

The street art created by artist Laura Slavinskaitė together with the Kulautuva community was inspired by a photo of Rosian Bagriansky. Taken in the summer of 1944 in Kulautuva, the photograph became known around the world. The curators deliberately chose a photograph used in a 2013 UNESCO exhibition commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day (January 27). The image was a wonderful assertion of life in the face of the horror and death of war. The exhibition organizers didn't know the identity of the girl in the photo or what had happened to her. And what a wonderful surprise awaited Rosian when she saw her own face displayed in an airport in the United States, smiling back from an enormous poster – the same face photographed in a field in Kulautuva. "I'm the child in the photo!" she cried out in a phone call to the curators. "I am living proof that miracles do happen..."

LIFE INTERRUPTED: THE JEWS OF KAUNAS

Ah, do you really believe
Oblivion has the final say in what is to be forgotten?
For it is often an image from the ashes rising
And stand in flesh, in full reality
Forever framed for every day to come.

Hirsh Osherovich³

The work of artist Tadas Vincaitis-Plūgas was inspired by a photograph from the interwar years showing Rosian Bagriansky and her mother Gerta. Rosian was born in Kaunas in 1935. Her father Paulius Bagriansky had a thriving textile business and her mother, a pianist who had studied in Paris, became a concertmaster with the Musical Theatre after the war.

³ Ah, do you really believe... (transl. R. Zemkauskas). *Giršas Ošerovičius. Šventoji kasdienybė, Vilnius: Vaga, 1968, 29.*



Life Interrupted. The Jews of Kaunas (by Tadas Vincaitis-Plūgas, 2020). A. Mickevičiaus Street 30, Kaunas. Photograph: Darius Petreikis

During the Second World War, Rosian's parents were determined to save their daughter and, after digging a hole beneath the fence of the Kaunas ghetto late at night, pushed her out into the arms of their former employee Bronė Budreikaitė.

One of Rosian's rescuers, Helene Holzman, remembered her first encounter with the girl:

One day, sitting there in Liudmila's room was a six-year-old girl with long, brown hair, a pretty pointy nose, and dark eyes. . . . Brave Bronė had pulled her out through the barbed wire fence and here she was; but no one had come up with an idea where to put her. "This child must live," I said, addressing the words of the wise old counselor to the small girl standing before me. But the child didn't want to see some strange woman; Regina and the "angels" spent a long time convincing her until she finally gave me her little hand and we walked together.⁴

Bronė Budreikaitė baptized Rosian and gave the girl her own surname. She became Irena Budreikaitė, or simply Ira. The girl was cared for by the so-called "angels", the rescuers of other Kaunas Jews, Natalya Fugalevich, Natalya Yegorova, and Lidija Golubovienė (Fugalevich), who had a cottage and farm in Kulautuva. Like many children rescued by the "angels", Rosian was also brought to this small town toward war's end.

The drawing was accompanied by a poem by one of the most famous Lithuanian Jewish poets, Hirsh Osherovich (1908–1994).

Osherowitch was born in Panevėžys and studied law at Kaunas University, where he also began his creative career, working at Yiddish language newspapers. At the start of World War II, he evacuated to the Soviet Union. After the war, he settled in Vilnius and wrote for a Yiddish language newspaper published in Moscow. In 1949, Osherowitch was arrested for "anti-Soviet", "nationalist-Zionist" activity and deported to Siberia. He returned in 1956 and continued his literary work in Vilnius. Osherowitch's work has been translated from Yiddish into Lithuanian by some of Lithuania's most prominent poets. In 1971, Osherowitch emigrated to Israel, where he continued to write and received numerous literary awards.

⁴ *Šitas vaikas turi gyventi. Elenos Holzmanienės užrašai.*

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THE JEWS OF KAUNAS

This book is an attempt to present Kaunas' Jewish history beginning with its most important facts, concepts, and names. We begin our review of this history from the first Jewish settlement in the city in the 15th century and proceed to recall the names of the most important citizens of Kaunas who lived and worked here, remembering their contributions to education, medicine, industry, business, culture, and other aspects of life and, of course, the more painful chapters of the community's history. This book is illustrated with historic photographs and original drawings.

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
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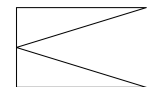
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