# Lithuania  << YIVO

[Suwalki was the birthplace of Regina Reinherz, mother of Sigmund Fischler. The following is from below:

*For Jews, the notion of "Lithuania" (Heb., Lita; Yid., Lite) has been applied variously. For some, virtually any Jew coming from a region roughly contiguous with the medieval grand duchy (including the imperial Russian provinces of Kovno, Vilna, **Suwałki** [Rus., Suvalki], Grodno, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Minsk, and Smolensk) qualifies as a "Litvak." Others exclude Jews from the latter four provinces, as well as those from the southern parts of Suwałki and Grodno, while some extend the compass to include Jews from Livonia and Courland (Kurland), present-day Latvia.*]


Southernmost of the three Baltic states. The name Lithuania originally referred to a grand duchy established along the Baltic coast to the northeast of Poland around 1250. By the mid-fourteenth century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had expanded into a large state, including substantial territories that today are part of Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. In 1386, it was joined to Poland in a personal union; the same monarch occupied the thrones of the two states. In 1569, Lithuania confederated formally with Poland in the Union of Lublin, forming a state often called the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita). With the Polish partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795, virtually all of the historic Lithuanian lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire.

An independent Lithuanian Republic was established in February 1918. Initially its capital was located in Vilnius (Vilna), but Poland's capture and incorporation of the city in 1920 caused the government to move to Kaunas (Kovno). In 1923, Lithuania invaded and annexed the formerly German Klaipėda (Memel) region; Germany forced its return in 1939. Following the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in September 1939, Vilnius once again came under Lithuanian rule, but 11 months later Lithuania was formally incorporated into the USSR as the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1991, it seceded from the Soviet Union, and an independent Lithuanian state was reestablished.

## Early History

For Jews, the notion of "Lithuania" (Heb., Lita; Yid., Lite) has been applied variously. For some, virtually any Jew coming from a region roughly contiguous with the medieval grand duchy (including the imperial Russian provinces of Kovno, Vilna, *Suwałki* [Rus., Suvalki], Grodno, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Minsk, and Smolensk) qualifies as a "Litvak." Others exclude Jews from the latter four provinces, as well as those from the southern parts of Suwałki and Grodno, while some extend the compass to include Jews from Livonia and Courland (Kurland), present-day Latvia.

Jewish communities existed in Lithuanian territories at least from the fourteenth century. In 1388 and 1389, Vytautas the Great promulgated charters or privileges granting the perhaps 6,000 Jews of the time protection of persons and property, as well as freedom of movement. Jews were further assured of judicial—actually communal—autonomy, and were allowed to engage in all fields of commerce. Subsequent rulers reaffirmed these privileges.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the main existing Jewish communities (Grodno, Slutsk, Brisk [Brest], and Pinsk) established an autonomous council of leading communities, Va'ad Medinat Lita. Until its disestablishment by state authorities in the 1760s, the Va'ad determined, to a considerable extent, the rules and regulations that governed Jewish public life in Lithuania. Perhaps most important, it collected taxes owed by the Jews to the government. Following the dissolution of the Va'ad and the imposition of an annual capitation tax on every Jew of at least one year of age, the authorities conducted a census in 1764 with the intention of using the results as a basis for future tax collection. According to this census, there were 157,649 Jews in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, of whom 76,474 lived in ethnic Lithuania (roughly the boundaries of the present-day country).

Following the annexation of Lithuanian territories by Russia, Lithuanian Jews (except those in Suwałki province, which was part of Polish territories not included in the Pale of Settlement) found themselves within the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement and subject to laws applying to all Jews in that territory in the western border regions of the Russian Empire. Nearly half lived in rural areas and made their living from the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcoholic beverages, or the leasing of inns, mills, fish ponds, and other agricultural activities. Other Jews were involved in commerce and artisanry in roughly equal proportions.


Although distinguished and influential rabbis such as Shabetai ben Me'ir ha-Kohen (ca. 1621–ca. 1662) and Mosheh ben Naftali Hirsh Rivkes (d. 1672) had lived there earlier, it was in the nineteenth century that Lithuania became a world center for traditional Torah learning. The beginning of this development is conventionally associated with the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shelomoh Zalman (1720–1797). In addition to inspiring generations of scholars to pursue rigorous study of the Talmud, the Gaon promoted and legitimized the ideological struggle against the Hasidic movement that was just then gaining a presence in Lithuania. As a consequence of the Gaon's enormous prestige and influence, the spread of Hasidism in Lithuania was indeed blocked to some extent. Consequently, the term —opponents (of Hasidism)—became synonymous with Litvaks in general. Nevertheless, communities of Hasidim continued to exist in the Vilna area, northeastern Lithuania, Latgalia and the Riga area, and, most notably, the region around Pinsk-Karlin.

Ḥayim of Volozhin (1749–1821), a leading disciple of the Gaon, established a new type of yeshiva at Volozhin in 1803. Characterized by intellectual rigor and

financial support from supporters beyond the local community, Volozhin became a model for other yeshivas. The Lithuanian yeshivas acquired great prestige. Among them were Mir (established in 1815), Telz (Telsiai; around 1870), Kelem (1872), Slobodka (Kaunas; about 1881), and Ponevezh (Panevėžys; 1908). The leaders of these and other yeshivas in Lithuania—including Eliʻezer Gordon (1840–1910), Yitsḥak Elḥanan Spektor (1817–1896), Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin (Netsiv; 1817–1893), Yosef Dov Ber Soloveichik (1820–1892), and Yosef Kahaneman (1888–1969) —profoundly influenced the shape of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism.

Also important in Lithuania was the Musar Movement, initiated in the mid-nineteenth century by Yisraʼel Salanter (Lipkin; 1810–1883). His followers created their own yeshivas, notably at Slobodka and Novogrudok (Novaredok), and influenced others. Yisraʼel Meʼir ha-Kohen (Ḥafets Hayim; 1838–1933), who was inclined to Salanter's teachings, led a yeshiva in Radin (Pol., Raduń; now Radun', Bel.). A different vision of the yeshiva found expression in combining traditional learning with secular studies. Such a yeshiva was founded by Yitsḥak Yaʼakov Reines (1839–1915) at Lida in 1904–1905.

Non-Orthodox trends also flourished in Lithuania, especially in Vilna, where the Haskalah movement had a strong influence. The first Hebrew journal in Lithuania, Pirḥe tsafon, appeared in Vilna in 1841, promoting the program of the Haskalah. Between that time and World War I, 86 Jewish periodicals (20 in Hebrew) were published in Lithuania, including the daily newspapers Ha-Zeman, Di yidishe tsaytung, Ha-Karmel, and others. The periodicals Ha-Melits, Ha-Levanon, and Ha-Yareaḥ, though published abroad, had many readers in Lithuania. The latter two provided a platform for Orthodox religious circles. Publications in the same spirit were published on behalf of the Matsdike ha-Rabim society in Kovno. The maskilim, for their part, advanced their own programs, despite the condemnations of rabbis and their followers. Author Mosheh Leib Lilienblum of Keidan (Keidany) and poet Yehudah Leib Gordon, who served as a teacher in Jewish government schools in Ponevezh, Shavli (Šiauliai), and Telz, recorded this struggle in their works. The novel ʻAyit tsavuʻa (The Hypocrite) by Avraham Mapu of Kovno deals with the same conflict.

The first Haskalah-inspired school was established in Vilna in 1808, the second by 1830, and others followed. In these schools, the Bible was taught with modern interpretations, along with Talmudic studies, Hebrew, Russian, German, history, geography, and arithmetic. The same format was implemented at many other schools in Lithuania. Thanks to a strong maskilic influence, the central Lithuanian districts (Vilna, Kovno, Grodno, and Suwałki) evolved by the end of the nineteenth century into centers of Jewish secular culture and education and became the seedbeds of the Russian Jewish nationalist and socialist movements. Much socialist and nationalist activity was centered in Vilna, in which the Bund, Poʻale Tsiyon, Tseʻire Tsiyon, Mizraḥi, and other political groups had a strong presence.

Nevertheless, Jewish religious culture remained strong, and established forms of learning, such as the traditional heder, continued to flourish. In Kovno at the

beginning of the twentieth century, there were some 1,100 private heders with more than 14,000 students; the district also had 63 Talmud Torah institutions with more than 3,000 students, and 52 schools teaching according to a state-approved curriculum, with 4,500 students. In Lithuania as a whole, there were about 2,500 s (teachers of the traditional heder), and 2,280 Jewish students studied in 239 public schools.

The 1897 census counted 757,038 Jews in the greater Lithuanian territories. There were 12 communities numbering more than 20,000 Jews, including Białystok, Bobruisk, Brest Litovsk, Dvinsk (Daugavpils), Gomel, Grodno, Kovno, Minsk, Mogilev, Pinsk, Vilna, and Vitebsk.

**World War I**

At the outset of World War I, Russian soldiers and local peasants, responding to a rumor that Jews were supplying information to the German army, launched attacks against Jews in several provincial towns in western Lithuania, including Kuziai. Even though a Duma committee refuted this libel, the authorities never withdrew their allegation and deported tens of thousands of Jews from the Kovno district to the Russian interior. By the time the Germans captured Vilna in late 1915, a flood of Jewish refugees from all over Lithuania had come to the city, and some 22,000 remained for an extended period.

The Germans treated the Jews decently and for a time (1916–1917) even showed understanding of their cultural-ethical needs. In accordance with the German Foreign Ministry's plan to set up a large, multiethnic, pro-German state in the provinces of Grodno, Vilna, Suwałki, Kovno, and Kurland, the occupation authorities (who called the area Ober-Ost) authorized, among other things, the reopening of the Keneset Yisra'el yeshiva in Slobodka, the publishing of the Yiddish daily newspaper Letste nayes, and the opening of high schools for Jews. Several Jewish officers in the German army contributed to this end. Identity cards issued to Jews were printed in both German and Yiddish.

The Germans changed their policy in light of revolutionary turmoil in Russia, supporting the creation of smaller Lithuanian and Latvian puppet nation-states in which the Jewish minority would have no special group status. Hence, for the most part they refused to allow the establishment of Jewish communal organizations, despite the intercession of prominent German Jews, including the artist Hermann Struck, who in summer 1917 was appointed adviser on Jewish affairs to the occupation regime. Local leaders, such as Vilna community head Jakub Wygodzki, Rabbi Yisra'el Nisan Kark of Kovno, and others, represented Jewish interests de facto. Some of these representatives conducted discussions with Lithuanian counterparts on cooperation in preparation for establishing an independent Lithuanian state, which most Lithuanian Jewish political leaders supported. Indeed, Lithuanian–Jewish political relations during this period were quite close, as Lithuanians sought Jewish support for national demands against rival Polish and Russian claims.

**The Interwar Years**

As a result of the emigration and mass deportation of some 120,000 Lithuanian Jews to Russia during World War I, and mainly owing to the annexation of the Vilna district by Poland in 1920, the number of Jews in independent Lithuania decreased by 1923 to 155,095 (7.6% of the total population). Only 25 years earlier, 212,666 Jews had lived in the Kovno province alone (home to 83% of the Jews of independent Lithuania). Nevertheless, Jews remained the largest national minority. Two-thirds of the Jewish population (25,044) lived in the capital, Kaunas; 6,845 Jews lived in Panevėžys; 5,338 in Šiauliai; 3,885 in Ukmergė; and the remaining lived in 33 smaller cities and 246 provincial towns and villages.

Most employed Lithuanian Jews were involved in commerce, industry, and crafts (43,239), with only a small minority in agriculture (4,996), the liberal professions (4,180), and transportation (2,348). Jews participated in the Lithuanian elections, which were still democratic before the ultranationalist Voldemaras–Smetona coup d'état of December 1926, and several held cabinet positions. In fact, the successive Lithuanian governments formed between 1918 and 1924 all included a special Ministry of Jewish Affairs. In the first Lithuanian government of 1918, Jakub Wygodzki was minister of Jewish affairs, Shimshon Rosenboim was deputy foreign minister, and Naḥman Rachmilewitz was deputy minister of commerce. Between three and eight Jewish representatives were elected to each of the three regular Lithuanian parliaments before the coup d'état, but after 1921 no Jews held cabinet positions except as ministers of Jewish affairs.

The Ministry of Jewish Affairs grew out of wartime Jewish–Lithuanian deliberations, culminating in August 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference with an eight-point Lithuanian pledge concerning Jewish national rights. In addition to a cabinet-level department to represent Jewish interests, Jews were promised civic equality; proportional group representation in parliament; recognition of Yiddish and Hebrew as official languages; unfettered observance of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays; autonomous administration of cultural, religious, and social welfare organizations; state support for Jewish schools; and the right to tax Jews to finance Jewish institutions. Similar pledges were made to other ethnic minorities. However, although many of these guarantees were implemented during the first three years of Lithuanian independence, the Lithuanian constituent assembly declined to incorporate them into the constitution, adopted in 1922. Once independence was internationally recognized, the increasingly nationalist Lithuanian political leadership no longer needed minority support, and it proceeded to turn the country from a federation of autonomous nationalities into a Lithuanian ethnocracy. By 1924 not only had the Ministry of Jewish Affairs been discontinued, but also the legal recognition that had been extended to many Jewish institutions, including the taxing power of Jewish communities, was revoked.

Nevertheless, the first years of Lithuanian independence witnessed a remarkable burst of collective Jewish political and cultural activity. The period began with the

first conference of Jewish communities, assembled in January 1920. The 141 delegates were divided into three factions: Zionists, 61; Agudas Yisroel, 54; Folkspartey and craftsmen, 23; and nonaffiliated delegates, 3. Rosenboim of the Zionists was elected conference president, with Rachmilewitz of Agudas Yisroel and Ozer Finkelstein of the Folkspartey his deputies. The conference also elected a Natsional-Rat (national council) of 34 representatives from the entire political and social spectrum. An executive committee was elected to implement economic, political, and cultural resolutions. Dozens of clerks and specialists provided professional support to this committee. Yudl Mark of the Folkspartey served as general secretary of the National Council.

The Ministry of Jewish Affairs and the Natsional-Rat invested massive efforts and resources to educate more than 13,000 Jewish children of elementary school age. At the same time, they avoided the language controversy between proponents of Yiddish and the advocates of Hebrew. In the smaller towns, where a limited number of students made it possible to establish and maintain only one school, compromises in the matter of language and curriculum were common. Such schools were often known as pshore-shuln (compromise schools). Out of 160 elementary schools in which more than 10,000 studied in the curricular year 1920–1921, 68 were pshore-shuln, 46 belonged to the Zionist Tarbut system, 30 to the religious Yavneh system, and 16 to the school system of the Yiddishist Kultur-lige. After the authorities abolished the activities of the Kultur-lige in 1924 because of suspected Communist infiltration of the leadership, some of its schools were supervised by the Yidishe Bildungs Geselshaft (Jewish Education Society), led by members of the Folkspartey. Over time, the pshore-shuln closed down; some of their teachers and students joined Yavneh, others Tarbut.

Following the 1926 coup d'état and the rise to power of the Nationalist Party, Jewish communities were reduced to scaled-down organizations engaged mainly in satisfying religious needs. Lithuanian Jewry remained without official representation. Only a handful of prominent individuals who were acceptable to the authorities, as well as the leadership of the War of Independence Veterans Organization (which had 3,000 members) would sometimes be able to intercede with the government on behalf of Jewish interests.

Even after the autonomous system was dissolved, however, the cooperative Jewish People's Banks, with more than 80 branches in various locations, continued to exist. Moreover, the government still provided more than 90 percent of the budget of the Jewish educational system, which in its 20 years of existence provided education to some 90 percent of all Jewish children—about 20,000 students in all. About 85 percent of those students attended schools with a Hebrew orientation; 15 percent studied in Yiddish.

Zionists (from the Revisionists on the right to Left Po'ale Tsiyon) constituted the largest political group within Lithuanian Jewry. Nearly 50,000 people voted in the election of delegates to the Nineteenth Zionist Congress (1937), and Zionist youth movements had 8,625 members in their prime (1931). Out of some 20,000 Jews who departed Lithuania during its period of independence, about half migrated to

Palestine. In 1935, the number of Jews going to Palestine, mostly members of He-Ḥaluts, reached a peak of 942 (out of 1,418 total Jews who emigrated from Lithuania).

The Orthodox religious group Agudas Yisroel was chiefly concerned with the maintenance of its educational institutions. Conversely, the Kultur-lige, which inclined to the political left, as well as the members of the Folkspartey and the Bund, supported Yiddish schools and encouraged cultural creation in the Yiddish language. The tiny Communist Party, with 514 Jewish members in 1933, operated underground. However, by the end of the 1930s, Communists had taken over the well-established daily newspaper Folksblat, which had been founded and published by the Folkists. Indeed, the 1930s witnessed a marked strengthening of Jewish left-wing political circles.

Lithuanian Jewry created hundreds of organizations, corporations, associations, and institutions that addressed religious-ethical, professional, economic, and artistic concerns. In 1938, the number of such organizations operating with permission from Lithuanian authorities was 215 (totaling 28% of all legally recognized sociocultural organizations in the country).

The main area of tension between Jews and their neighbors in Lithuania was economic. As urbanization progressed, Lithuanians found themselves competing with Jewish merchants and artisans. The slogan "Lithuania for Lithuanians" was taken up with increasing stridency as the government became more authoritarian and as the world economic crisis intensified after 1929. In 1938, Articles 73 and 74 of the constitution, which had assured the various minorities in Lithuania of autonomous rights in education, culture, and welfare, were repealed. Jewish students at the University of Kaunas were required to occupy separate benches in the lecture halls. As restrictions on acceptances were imposed on Jewish students in the medical, agricultural, and engineering faculties, the number of Jewish university students continued to drop significantly (from 1,206 in 1932 to 500 in 1939). Beatings of Jews in the streets were not uncommon. Still, unlike Romania and Poland, there were no pogroms in Lithuania before the outbreak of World War II. There was also some cooperation between Lithuanian and Jewish intellectuals in this period. For example, an anthology of Lithuanian literature was published in Hebrew translation, and a collection of Lithuanian dainas (folk songs) was published in Yiddish translation.

In the absence of an official representative body for Lithuanian Jewry, a small organization operated secretly. Several prominent individuals with extensive public and political experience led this organization, including former member of parliament Jacob Robinson; editor Ruvn Rubinshteyn (of Di idishe shtime), and Jacob Goldberg, one of the leaders of the Loḥame he-Ḥazit (Frontline Fighters) organization. Owing to their efforts and their close connections with the Lithuanian establishment, national leaders often issued statements intended to pacify Jewish citizens in a situation of growing tension and animosity. Nevertheless, acts of violence, as well as defamation in the media, persisted.

**World War II**

In late October 1939, when Vilnius was repatriated to Lithuania and the Lithuanian army entered the city, some local inhabitants, perhaps encouraged by Lithuanian authorities, launched violent attacks against Jews. Counting the 80,000 Jews of the Vilna province, into which some 12,000 Jewish refugees had fled from Poland (with several thousands more going to Kaunas), the Jewish population of Lithuania now totaled about 250,000—about 10 percent of the overall population. Among the refugees were 2,600 yeshiva students and their teachers, 2,065 members of Zionist youth movements, about 1,500 activists of Zionist parties, and 560 activists of the Bund and other organizations. Writers, intellectuals, political leaders, and public figures from various circles also stood out among the refugees. Their primary goal was to depart for other countries, mainly overseas, as soon as possible, but for the time being they needed support.

A coordinating committee led by Jacob Robinson undertook those functions. Among other things, the committee regulated the efficient utilization of the more than $1 million provided by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of the United States (HIAS), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and other organizations. Many refugees did manage to leave Lithuania, mainly through the USSR or Scandinavia.

**Soviet Rule: 1940–1941**.

 Refugee transit through Lithuania was cut short on 15 June 1940 with the takeover of the territory of Lithuania by the Red Army, followed by the gradual establishment of a Soviet administration. Despite the apprehension and reservations of many Jews, most accepted the new regime, especially in view of the fact that the alternative was a Nazi takeover.

The single year of Soviet rule led to both structural and formal changes. On the one hand, Jews suffered when the Soviets nationalized private businesses: 83 percent of such businesses had belonged to Jews, including 57 percent of nationalized industrial companies. The new authorities also abolished the Hebrew educational system and religious institutions, closed all Jewish public organizations, and curtailed the Yiddish daily press (reduced from seven to two newspapers—Emes in Kovno and Vilner emes in Vilna). On the other hand, Jews could and did serve in the state and party apparatus; and institutions of higher learning, which had imposed a  quota on Jewish students, were now opened to them. In this period, too, former members of outlawed youth movements secretly organized underground circles. These organizations formed the basis for the underground movement that subsequently operated through a cooperative alliance among Zionists, Communists, Bundists, and others in the ghettos of Lithuania during the Nazi occupation.

During the year of Soviet occupation, the authorities arrested a host of notable figures from among the Jewish leadership. In all, some 7,000 Jews were exiled in the context of mass deportations initiated by the Soviet authorities in June 1941.

Household heads were incarcerated in labor camps. Furthermore, the Lithuanian nationalist underground (Lithuanian Activist Front; LAF) stepped up its military preparations and anti-Jewish incitement in anticipation of the invasion by the Nazi troops.


**Under Nazi Occupation**.

The Nazi invasion triggered a massive flight of Jews toward Russia. However, the swift capture of Lithuania (accomplished within 3–4 days) reduced the number of those who managed to escape into the Soviet interior to about 15,000. About 5,000–6,000 of them subsequently joined the Red Army, mainly as soldiers of the 16th Lithuanian Infantry Division or the pro-Soviet Polish armed forces established in the USSR in 1943.

About 220,000 Jews remained in Lithuania. Many suffered attacks and pogroms by Lithuanians, as was the case in Rasein (Raseiniai), Keidan, and Kovno. In Slobodka, at least 800 Jews were slaughtered in a pogrom on the night of 25 June when synagogues were burned and 60 Jewish houses were torched. In Vilna, the Lithuanian smaugik (stranglers), as the local stormtroopers were called by the masses, murdered Jews on the streets.

Jews from all over Lithuania were incarcerated in concentration points that were intended to serve as sites for mass shootings in the coming months. These included the Ponary (Paneriai) forest near Vilna, the Kuziai forest near Shavli, and the Ninth Fort near Kovno. Killing operations began on a limited scale in July 1941 and expanded markedly during the following months. At first only Jewish men were targeted, but women and children were soon shot indiscriminately as well. In a typical operation, the plundered and terrified Jews were marched to the killing sites, where they were forced to enter pits prepared in advance and were promptly shot to death. In the autumn of 1941, some 15,000 Jews from Kovno, along with some 5,000 Jews transferred from Germany, were executed at the Kovno's Ninth Fort alone. By the end of that year, nearly 180,000 Jews (about three-quarters of Lithuanian Jewry) had perished in pogroms and organized mass killings. The remaining 40,000 Jews were concentrated for the time being in four major ghettos: Kovno (16,000), Vilna (4,700), Shavli (18,000), and Svencionys (2,000), as well as in several other, smaller locations.

A belief that the labor of the Jews for the German war effort could delay the liquidation of the ghettos motivated ghetto leaders to make the most of the manpower potential available. In this respect, there was hardly any difference between such otherwise disparate figures as Elkhonen Elkes, who was democratically elected to chair the Council of Elders of the Kovno ghetto, and Jakub Gens, who was appointed by the Germans to rule the Vilna ghetto and treated his fellow Jews with a firm hand. Leaders of the other ghettos in Lithuania and Latvia took much the same position, as did ghetto heads in other countries. All of them initiated the establishment of workshops within the boundaries of the ghetto in an effort to demonstrate the indispensability of the Jewish community.

During periods of relative calm in 1942 and early 1943, there was a marked recovery among the Jewish masses in the ghettos. Social and cultural life was reorganized, religious observance was possible, and creative activity was pursued. Theatrical companies, choirs, orchestras, libraries, social clubs, and schools existed at various levels. At the same time, there was growing cooperation among Zionists, Bundists, and Communists. Members of all of these groups were influenced by the young poet Abba Kovner's call in January 1942 to organize armed resistance. Resistance groups, formed in the wake of Kovner, sought to warn Jews in the ghettos that their fate had been sealed despite the temporary respite. They also strove to establish contacts with potential allies outside the ghettos and to prepare for a final battle. During this period, the first links were established with the commanders of partisan units operating near the Belorussian–Lithuanian border.

The period of relative calm came to an end on 5 April 1943 when some 5,000 Jews were taken out of provincial towns in the Vilna area and murdered. The Vilna ghetto was destroyed on 23 September, and most of its 14,000 inhabitants were deported to the Estonian camps of Ereda, Goldfilz, Vaivara, and Klooga, as well as to the Kaiserwald camp in Latvia. Others were left in local labor camps or sent to killing centers in Poland. The Kovno ghetto became a concentration camp in the fall of 1943, and its territory and population were reduced. Most of its inhabitants were dispersed to secondary internment sites in Aleksotas, Mariampolė (Kapsukas), Keidan, and Shanciai, and some 2,800 were deported to camps in Estonia. The Shavli ghetto was reduced substantially; about 1,400 of its inhabitants were transferred to local labor camps in September 1943. It and the Kovno ghetto were destroyed completely in July 1944. In this period, some 1,250 Lithuanian Jews fled to the forests with the assistance of underground organizations; 650 additional Jews, mainly from smaller towns, departed for the forests at their own initiative, as individuals or families.

Even in 1943, amid signs that the tide of war was turning against the Germans, some Lithuanians continued to display hostility to Jews, and there were many incidents in which Lithuanians betrayed them to the Gestapo. With some exceptions, Lithuanian clergy failed to caution the mostly Catholic population against hostile treatment of Jews.

## The Postwar Period

Of the more than 14,000 Lithuanian Jews who had been transported to concentration camps, about 6,000 survived; and 4,000 returned from the forests and from various hiding places in Lithuania. Of about 220,000 Jews who had remained in Lithuania under Nazi rule in June 1941, about 4 percent survived; and of 22,000 Lithuanian Jews who were in the USSR during that period, at least half survived. About 1,800 of the survivors who were liberated to displaced persons camps in Germany eventually migrated to Palestine. A smaller number of Lithuanian Jewish displaced persons left for other countries, mainly the United States; only a few returned to Lithuania. Several thousand survivors departed Soviet-ruled Lithuania at the end of World War II, either in the context of

repatriation to Poland, through Beriḥah (a movement to resettle Jews in Palestine), or in other ways.

In 1959, 24,672 residents of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic identified themselves as Jews, 69 percent of them citing Yiddish as their mother tongue. A substantial number migrated to Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1989, there were 12,312 Jews in Lithuania; 35 percent of them again citing Yiddish. In the same year, the Cultural Society of Lithuanian Jews was established. Later on, this society became the central organization of Lithuanian Jewry, which by that time included a significant number of Jewish immigrants from Russia and Ukraine. The overall number of Jews in Lithuania declined continuously in the last decades of the twentieth century. By 2003, fewer than 4,000 Jews remained in Lithuania.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the largest and most important Jewish community in post-Soviet Lithuania was in Vilnius, and there were about half a dozen other, smaller communities, including Kaunas, Klaipėda, and Šiauliai. Despite the activity of antisemitic circles and some public figures, Lithuanian authorities made statements insisting on the equality of Jewish survivors; at the same time, however, they announced the exoneration of thousands of former (Soviet) political prisoners, including murderers of Jews. Still, by a decision of the Seimas, memorial plaques in Lithuanian and Yiddish were erected at numerous sites where the mass murder of Jews had been committed by the Nazis and their local collaborators. A special educational program devoted to prewar Jewish life as well as to teaching the Holocaust was added to the curriculum of many schools.

By 2000, Jewish cultural and educational institutions were active in Vilnius, including two Jewish schools where students studied Yiddish and Hebrew, a Jewish museum, and a periodical, Yerushelayim de-Lite (Jerusalem of Lithuania; a reference to Vilnius). At the same time, a branch of the Jewish Agency and a Lubavitch center also dealt with local Jewish affairs. One synagogue remained at the city center. The Vilnius Summer Program in Yiddish, which was founded 1998, was reconstituted as the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University in 2001; it runs annual summer programs in Yiddish language and culture.

**Suggested Reading**

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YIVO Archival Resources

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