

Kalvarija << Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Lithuania
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Kalvarija

A small town and regional center in the Province of Marijampole

Year	Total Population	Jews	Jews as percentage of Total Population
1766	1,055		
1827	5,438	3,072	56%
1865	8,135	6,508(?)	80%
1897	9,378	3,581	38%
1914	10,000	7,000(?)	70%
1923	4,529	1,233	27%
1939	1000		

The construction of Kalvarija began in the 17th century on the two banks of the Sesupe River in southwest Lithuania. A village by the name of Trabi previously occupied the area. Around the year 1678, King August II conferred upon it the privileges of a city. Between 1795-1807, the city and district were part of Prussia, and between 1807-1815 it was part of the "Grand Duchy of Warsaw." The Russians captured it in 1815 and they included it in the District of Suvalk[i]. Its location on the St. Petersburg -- Warsaw road led to its rapid development. It had 501 houses in 1827 and from 1867, Kalvarija was a provincial city. It had a court, post office, telegraph station, and hospital with 25 beds. Three doctors were on its staff. There were also army physicians at the military barracks located in the town. There was also a large jail and several alcohol distilleries as well as a large market. Some 250 petty craftsmen worked in the town. Two army units were based there. The city was built according to a careful urban plan -- straight, right-angle streets with wide sidewalks.

Russian rule continued until 1915. During World War I, the Germans occupied the entire region. In the war's battles, one half of the city, some 900 houses, were destroyed. In 1919, the Germans withdrew from the city. It was handed over to the government of independent Lithuania, which incorporated it into Marijampole Province.

Kalvarija was connected to the Lithuanian railroad network in 1921. In 1926, the psychiatric hospital, formerly in Tavrig (Taurage) was relocated to the former army barracks of Kalvarija. The hospital had 500 beds and it was one of Lithuania's largest medical facilities. During World War II, many of the town's homes were destroyed.

The Jewish Community -- To the End of World War I

All signs indicate that there was a Jewish community, which was engaged in weaving, in the village of Trabi that preceded Kalvarija. In 1713, the Jews received permission from King August II to build a synagogue on the condition that it would not be taller than the church. Jewish craftsmen received permission to practice their crafts without having to be members of the craft guilds.

Jews earned their living through commerce, crafts, agriculture, and, to a lesser degree, industry. Nearly all the stores in the town were Jewish owned. The grain trade was also in Jewish hands, and they exported the produce to Germany. Tens of grain merchants lived most of the year in nearby Koenigsburg. They served as middlemen between the grain dealers of Kalvarija and the large grain magnates of the big city. The achievements of German Jews in the realms of culture and science greatly impressed the Jews of Kalvarija. The sons of the well to do, in addition to learning Talmud and Bible, began to study Russian and German. The Yiddish of the town was also 'Germanized.' This is how 'Kalvaiyer Deitch,' [the German/Yiddish of Kalvarija] which was famous throughout Lithuania, came into being.

The German model, on one hand, coupled with the grinding poverty of the majority of the Jewish population on the other hand, encouraged many of the young people of the town to seek their futures abroad. Hundreds of young people and families left in the 1880s and emigrated to the United States, South Africa, and also to Eretz Yisrael. Kalvarija itself had several 'experts' who earned their living by smuggling people into Germany thus enabling them to board boats to carry them abroad. This was the cheapest and least complicated way to start the journey to one's new home. A boar bristle processing industry, which employed dozens of Jews, also developed in the town. Jewish merchants also exported butter, poultry and other agricultural products to Germany. The Korngold family had a large number of beehives; the Epstein, Kronson, and Solomon families raised tobacco. Kalvarija also boasted of one of Lithuania's largest flourmills (Romanov family), and a tobacco and cigarette factory (Solomon family). The army bases located near the city and the large prison (The Golden) also served as sources of income for Jewish contractors and suppliers.

The bristle workers organized in the years 1893-1897 under the influence of the Russian Social-Democratic Party and the [Jewish] Bund. The workers carried out strikes to support their demand to shorten their working day to 10 hours and to improve what were starvation wages. The workers achieved some of their aims as a result of these strikes.

Most of the Jewish children, as was the practice in those days, were taught in the [traditional] heder. In some of them, both the Hebrew language and its grammar were studied. Kalvarija also had a Talmud-Torah where 150 poor children, taught by 9 teachers, received their education at no charge. From 1883, the Talmud-Torah began to teach Hebrew and its grammar. In an emotional notice printed in 1884 in the newspaper Hamelitz [founded in 1860, it was the first Hebrew newspaper to

appear in Russia], officers of the Talmud-Torah, Israel Isser Harb, Dov Ratner, Judah Kalman Romberg, and Moses Levinson, called on former residents now living in America and South Africa to come to the aid of the poor children being taught in the Talmud-Torah. Contributions were to be sent to Rabbi B. Z. Sternfeld.

In 1858-1859, with the approval of the government, a general Jewish school was established. It had between 80-100 boys and girls. Some of them continued their studies in the Russian gymnasia in Suvalk[i] and Marijampole. In 1871, there were 15 young Kalvarija Jews studying in these institutions. In 1899, several of the town's wealthy men, including Poliak, Muskat, Fried, Rosenholtz and others founded the "National School." It enrolled scores of children from poor families who studied Hebrew and Jewish history. It was designed to continue the education of those who had completed their regular heder studies.

Replacing the old wooden synagogue whose walls and foundation were crumbling, was a new stone building constructed in 1803. The new synagogue had thick stone walls and an elaborate Holy Ark and Bimah [Torah Reader's Platform] constructed of wood by a master craftsman. The walls were decorated with paintings of animals. The women's section was on both sides of the building. At the entrance were two small prayer rooms -- one for the "Psalm Reciters' Society" and the other for the Burial Society. In 1869, a Beit Midrash [Study House] was erected in the courtyard of the synagogue. It was constructed with funds donated by Sarah the wife of Azriel Sobolwitz of Koenigsburg. This was a large, spacious building with walls constructed of bricks. In addition to the large prayer room, there were smaller rooms used [for prayer] by the free loan society [Gemilat Hesed], the Society for the Dowering of Brides [Hakhnasat Kalah], and three rooms used by the Talmud-Torah for providing poor children with a free education. Kalvarija had additional small prayer rooms [known as Kloizim - singular Kloiz]: the Kloiz in the name of Rabbi Leibele Broida, the Mishmar [Guard] Kloiz, the teamsters' Kloiz, the Kloiz of Elijah Azriel and the Margulies Kloiz.

Torah study and lessons took place in the Hevra Shas [Talmud study group]. In existence from 1796, every night a page of Talmud was studied. This enabled them to complete the entire Talmud in the period of seven years. That occasion was marked with a festive dinner celebration. In addition, there was a Mishnah study group that met for instruction by the rabbi after morning prayers each day. For the simpler Jews a class in Yiddish studied Ein Ya'akov [a text containing the legendary sections of the Talmud]. The members of the Psalm Society [Hevra T'hilim] also met regularly to recite Psalms together.

Among the rabbis who served the community were: Rabbi Samuel ben Eliezer (18th cent.); Rabbi Arie Leib Shapira; Rabbi Joshua Isaac Shapira, author of the book Emek Yehoshua [the Valley of Joshua] published in Warsaw, 1842; Rabbi Mordecai Klatchko (Meltzer) (1852-1864); Rabbi Mordecai Halevi Hochman (served from 1865); Rabbi Ben Zion Sternfeld, author of the book Sha'arey Tzion [Gates of Zion](Piotrikow, 1903) and of many other volumes; Rabbi Eliezer Simha Rabinowitz (1887-1909); Rabbi Zelig Reuben Bangiss (served from 1938) and later lived in Jerusalem; in documentation from 1940 the name of a Rabbi Moses

Mezigal, apparently the last rabbi, is recorded.

There were numerous activities in the area of social welfare: a Free Loan Society [Gemilat Hesed] provided loans to the needy which were paid off in small weekly installments; a Society for Visiting the Sick [Bikur Holim] which took upon itself the task of providing the ill the medical help and medications at no charge; an organization of women [both married and single] called Medkhen Varein which helped the poor during their recovery from illness. It even provided the funds for those who had to travel abroad for treatment.

In the last decade of the 19th century, Kalvarija boasted a number of intellectuals fluent in Hebrew. Some of them subscribed to the Hebrew newspapers Hamelitz, Hamagid, Hashahar and others.

Some local Jews made aliyah to the Land of Israel even before the Hibbat Tzion Movement began its activities. There were at least nine Kalvarija Jews buried in the Mt. of Olives Cemetery in Jerusalem in the last half of the 19th century. In the early 1880s, some Kalvarija Jews joined the Yesod Hama'aleh organization. Founded in Suvalk, its goal was to resettle the Land of Israel. Among those who came on aliyah in the 1890s were the family of Israel-Mayer Hodorovsky, who was among the founders of Hadera; the family of Moses Leib Kahana, one of the founders of Carmel Mizrahi [winemakers], and his son, Elijahu Aaron, who was one of the founders of Tel Aviv. In 1890 the Hovevei Tzion branch in Kalvarija proposed gathering signatures in every town and city in Lithuania to send a petition to Baron Hirsch to urge him to support the rebuilding of the Land of Israel instead of his projects of resettling Jews in Argentina and the Crimea. The Shoharei Toshiya [Friends of Understanding] organization, whose goal was to support educational projects and work towards the upbuilding of the Land of Israel, was founded in Kalvarija in 1894. The Zionist Organization was active in the town from 1898. In the 1909 list of contributors to the fund for the Land of Israel, there were 120 Jews from Kalvarija.

Among the prominent natives of Kalvarija are numbered: Kalman Schulman (1821-1899) the author and translator. He translated the Secrets of Paris [Le Mysteres de Paris] by the French author Eugene Sue (1804-1857). He also translated the works of Josephus. All of his 24 books were published in Vilna. Two of the rabbis of Reform Temple Emanu-el in New York City, Dr. Samuel Schulman and Dr. Samuel H. Goldenson were Kalvarija born. Two sons of the teacher Israel Mayer Elkess were noted physicians in Kovno. One of them, Dr. Elhanan Elkess, was the head of the Jewish Committee in Ghetto Kovno. He fulfilled this most difficult position with great honor.

In the fall of 1914 with the outbreak of World War I, the Russian General Renenkamph ordered the local Jews to do road construction work as a punishment for their alleged sympathy for the Germans. In the battles that took place in the area during the war, 220 local Jews were injured. Half the city was destroyed by fire, including the old synagogue. Circumstances forced most of the Jews to leave the city and to scatter throughout Russia. After the Germans captured Kalvarija,

many returned to their destroyed city. They were dependent on outside support that was provided by the Koeningsburg branch of the Aid Society of the Jews of Germany [Hilfsverein].

Independent Lithuania

With the declaration of the establishment of independent Lithuania on February 16, 1918, along with the withdrawal of the German army in the beginning of 1919, some of the former Jewish residents scattered throughout Russia began to return. Because of its nearness to the District City of Marijampole *and its proximity to the newly established border with Poland, which cut Kalvarija off from what had been its natural adjoining territory*, the town's importance declined. It was reduced to being only a regional center. In the wake of the declaration of Jewish Autonomy, Kalvarija elected a committee of 11 members. In 1921, its members were split among the following groupings: Young Zion List - 5; Unity - 2; Artisans - 1; Workers - 1; Unclassified - 2. The Committee was involved in most areas of Jewish life in the city between 1921-1925. As many Kalvarija residents were fluent in Hebrew, the minutes of the Committee's deliberations were recorded in both Hebrew and Yiddish on facing pages. During most of these four years, the City Council had 4 Jewish members. In 1924, a Jew was elected vice-mayor. In 1934 on 3 Jews were elected (out of 9 City Council members); they were Blumanson, Malakh and Kronson.

The Jews who returned after World War I began to reconstruct their destroyed houses and most resumed their former occupations. The economic situation was precarious and the shopkeepers were the first to suffer. Even the situation of the grain merchants worsened, a direct result of the government's restrictive legislation. Not good either was the position of the Jewish farmers and artisans. The critical economic situation that effected most of Kalvarija's Jews is pointed to by the fact that in 1923 the Jewish Community Council turned to the National Council [Va'ad Ha'areztz] -- that is the National Council of Lithuanian Jews [Natsionalrat] for emergency aid and clothing for 97 men, women and children.

In the government survey of 1931, Kalvarija had 72 stores and commercial establishments, of which 60 (83%) were Jewish owned. The breakdown is as follows (the first number are Jewish owned, the second number, the total number of establishments): grocery stores - 7 - 8; restaurants and taverns - 2 - 5; food stuffs - 3 - 3; beverages - 2 - 2; clothing, fur and textile products - 7 - 9; shoes and leather - 5 - 5; haberdashery and linens - 1 - 1; pharmacy and cosmetics - 1 - 3; watches and jewelry - 2 - 2; tools and metal products - 4 - 4; building supplies and furniture - 2 - 2; heating fuel - 1 - 1; overland haulage - 1 - 1; paper, books and writing materials - 0 - 1; others - 1 - 1. According to the same survey, there were 16 small factories and workshops under Jewish ownership: the electric power station; edible oil press; tannery; 2 flour mills; photography studio; locksmith; and the following workshops - 4 producing shoes; and one each producing men's hats; tombstones; cigarettes; wool spinning; and farm machinery. Both Jews and Lithuanians worked in these enterprises.

In 1937 Kalvarija had 32 Jewish artisans: 6 butchers; 5 tailors; 5 needleworkers; 4 bakers; 3 shoemakers; 3 barbers; 3 watchmakers; and a milliner, bookbinder, locksmith and blacksmith. At the same time 2 of the 5 physicians, 2 of the 3 dentists and two of the lawyers were Jews. The psychiatric hospital, the largest of its kind in Lithuania with 500 beds, provided Jewish contractors and suppliers with their livelihoods. The natural beauty of the area, its clear and pure air, its rushing river through pine forests, attracted many Jewish vacationers. These visitors also contributed to the economic well-being of Kalvarija's Jews.

The Folksbank had a branch in town. It had 246 members in 1927 but by 1939, it declined to 190. A branch of the United Credit Organization of Jewish Farmers also operated. According to the 1939 official telephone book, 36 of the 89 private listings were Jews. The agitation of the Lithuanian organization of merchants - "Verslas" against buying in Jewish owned stores led to an unofficial boycott. The development of Lithuanian co-operatives that took control of the export of grain and the import of farm equipment, fertilizer and seed, resulted in many Jews losing their livelihood. Another example of scheming against Jews was the proposal of the National Lithuanian Party in Kalvarija in 1939 to transfer the local market day to the Jewish Sabbath. The situations thus created led many people to emigrate to the United States or South Africa or to relocate to the larger cities of Lithuania.

Kalvarija's Jewish children were educated in the Yavneh School, which had an average enrollment of 135 students, the Yiddish School, which had an average enrollment of 130 students, and in the Hebrew High School, which had 8 classes. This last institution closed in 1935 due to the lack of students. The Progymnasia operated in its place. Kalvarija also had a Hebrew language nursery school. There was also a 2,000 volume Hebrew and Yiddish library. It was connected with the Ezra Organization and was housed in its own facility, a room provided at no charge by the Folksbank.

From time to time, a theater company would visit the town to perform plays. Local thespians also put on plays and donated the proceeds to the Jewish National Fund [JNF], Keren Hayesod [United Israel Appeal], WIZO [Women's Zionist Organization], and Keren Tel Hai.

Nearly all divisions of the Zionist Movement were to be found, among them Hashomer Hatzair and Betar. There was a kibbutz training farm of Hehalutz, whose members, both boys and girls, did all kinds of work in town as they waited impatiently for their hoped for immigration certificates to Eretz Yisrael. A fair number of the youth who received a Zionist education in the Hebrew language school and were involved in Zionist youth groups did make it to Eretz Yisrael.

Following are the results of the elections in Kalvarija for the various Zionist Congresses.

Year	Shekalim Statists	Total Votes Mizrahi	Working Eretz Yisrael	Revisionists	General Zionists
		TZ'S	TZ'TZ	A	B

15th	1927	50	26	2	3	4	16	-	-	1
16th	1929	180	107	24	3	49	27	-	-	4
17th	1931	163	131	67	2	45	13	-	-	4
18th	1933	-	503			126	30	-	32	12
19th	1935	572	514			-	3	73	82	21

The sporting activity of the Jewish youth was centered in the local branch of Maccabi, which had a few score members. Jews were active in the volunteer fire brigade of Kalvarija. One of them, Abba Blumenson, received the decoration of Vitatus the Great in 1937.

There were 5 synagogues: The Great Synagogue, the Beit Midrash, 2 Kloiz, and 1 shtibel. The Great Synagogue was built on the ruins of the old synagogue, which had been destroyed by fire during World War I. It was a thick walled structure, whose interior walls were decorated with original illustrations of animals and birds executed by a local artisan. The pulpit [amud] was also a masterful work of art. Until his aliyah to Eretz Yisrael in 1938, Rabbi Zelig Reuben Bangiss served the community. He also functioned as a rabbi in Jerusalem. The last rabbi of Kalvarija was Rabbi Moses Mezigal.

During this time, the self-help organizations Ezra and Gemilat Hasadim [Free Loan Society], as well as the others typical of Jewish Lithuania carried on their work in Kalvarija. In addition, "The Society for the Protection of Jewish Psychiatric Patients," which also had a branch in Kovno, concerned itself with finding appropriate living quarters for homeless patients. They also secured a separate wing for Jewish patients in the local mental hospital [the largest in Lithuania].

World War II & Its Aftermath

In 1939, the Germans expelled 2,400 Jews from Suvalk[i] Province in Poland to Lithuania. Eight hundred of them were settled in Kalvarija where the local community cared for their every need with great devotion.

When Lithuania became a Soviet Republic in June 1940, the Jewish owned enterprises were nationalized. A commissar, who later became the director, was appointed the head of each business. The supply of goods was severely curtailed, and prices skyrocketed. The middle class, most of whose members were Jews, was gravely affected. The standard of living plummeted. The Zionist Youth movements were forcibly disbanded and the Komsomol, the Communist youth movement, expended great effort in recruiting Jewish youth into their ranks. All Hebrew educational institutions were also shut down.

On Sunday, June 22, 1941, the first day of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, the German army entered Kalvarija. On July 1, an order was issued by the Lithuanian police requiring all Jews to wear a yellow star on their clothing and prohibiting them from using the sidewalks. Jews were taken for forced labor, and both on the way to and on the return from their forced labor assignments, they were publicly humiliated and abused in full sight of the local Lithuanian

population. In the beginning of July, 90 men and women, including Lithuanian Communists, Jewish intellectuals, and others, were held in the Zidruyevetz Hotel. There they were beaten and abused over a period of days. On July 5 they were all taken to Orios Lake, some two kilometers from town, and there on a bluff, next to previously prepared pits, they were shot and buried. On the Sabbath, August 30, 1941, all the Jews were assembled, ostensibly to be transferred to the Marijampole (cf) Ghetto. To transport their belongings, a large number of wagons were gathered from surrounding villages. The loaded wagons were taken instead to the local synagogue where they were emptied. In place of their possessions, the Jews were transported to barracks in Marijampole. There they joined Jews from the surrounding areas and the local residents -- totaling some 8,600 people.

On Monday, September 1, 1941 [9 Elul, 5701], they were all taken to the banks of the Sesupe River where they were shot next to previously prepared pits. Only a few Jews managed to escape from the slaughter, but, they too, were caught by the Lithuanians and executed. After they were 'rid of their Jews,' Kalvarija's Lithuanians, led by their priest, in a frenzy destroyed all the Jewish owned stores that were near the church. From the bricks of the destroyed stores, they built a wall around the church.

During the war about half of the houses in town were destroyed by fire. Nothing remained of the Jewish cemetery. The Beit Midrash, which was not damaged, served a local grain co-operative as a warehouse. After the war, in 1945, one Jewish family, Korngal, returned. They lived in their former house for about six months. Between the years 1970-1989, there was one Jew in town. In the early 1990s, the old Jewish cemetery was restored.

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