

DISCOVER JEWISH HERITAGE IN VILNIUS



VILNIUS



Lithuania's capital was once known throughout the world as the Jerusalem of the North. During the interwar period, almost a third of its population was made up of Jewish families. It was a real golden age for Yiddish culture: Jewish scholars and rabbis lived in the city, and it was home to over 100 synagogues and prayer houses.

Gaon year:

2020s - Vilna Gaon and Lithuanian Jewish Year

The year 2020 marks the 300th anniversary of the great Lithuanian Rabbi, the Litvak religious leader and the most prominent Litvak cultural representative - Vilna Gaon Elijah ben Solomon Zalman. Considering the fact that Lithuanian Jews were an integral part of Lithuanian society from the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and their society contributed significantly to the development of Lithuanian statehood, history, culture and science, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania has announced that 2020 will be known as the year of Vilna Gaon and Lithuanian Jews.



1. VILNA GAON STATE JEWISH MUSEUM: HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION

**Pamėnkalnio g. 12, www.jmuseum.lt
I-IV 9:00-17:00, V 9:00-16:00, VII 10:00-16:00**

The Holocaust Exhibition at the VGSJM briefly represents the life of Jews in Lithuania and presents the Holocaust during the Second World War: the ghetto creation and liquidation circumstances, the importance of armed and spiritual resistance in the ghetto, forced labour in concentration camps, saving Jews, and the destruction of cultural heritage in the USSR. The exhibition presents an installation of a shelter in the ghetto where people can hear fragments of the Yitskhok Rudashevski's diary, which was written in the Vilnius ghetto.

Near the museum, there is a monument to the Righteous Among the Nations, the Dutch consultant Jan Zwartendijk, who gave some 2,200 Jews visas to Curaçao Island in 1940, which ultimately saved their lives. Near it stands a monument to the Righteous Among the Nations of the World, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese consul in Lithuania (1939-1940), who helped save the lives of 6,000 Jews in 1940.



2. JASCHA HEIFETZ HOUSE

Vilniaus g. 25

From 1906 to 1909, the violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz studied at the Vilnius Music School, which at that time was located in the house on Vilnius Street 25. Nachman Rachmilevich, a public figure and politician, lived on the same street, in building number 27.



3. JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTRE OF LITHUANIA

Pylimo g. 4, www.lzb.lt

Today, about 3,000 Jews live in Lithuania, which is only 5% of the Jewish population that lived here before the Second World War. The Lithuanian Jewish community was restored in 1989. It organises cultural, educational and religious events, and oversees Jewish cultural and historical heritage objects.



4. THE FIRST YIVO HEADQUARTERS

J. Basanavičiaus g. 16

In 1925, Max Weinreich founded the YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research) headquarters in one of the premises of this building. YIVO soon became the largest Jewish scientific institution in the world. The world's leading scientists and public figures became members of the institute's honorary presidium: A. Einstein, S. Freud, E. Bernstein etc. YIVO played an important role in fostering Yiddish philology and taking care of Jewish heritage in Eastern Europe.



5. VILNA GAON STATE JEWISH MUSEUM: TOLERANCE CENTER

**Naugarduko g. 10/2, www.jmuseum.lt
Tolerance Center: I-IV 10:00-18:00,
V 10:00-16:00, VII 10:00-16:00**

At the end of the 19th century, this building had a dining room for the poor run by the Jewish community; it even functioned during the First World War. A professional Jewish theatre was established here in 1918; after 1930, a cinema was added to the

building. In 1989, the building was transferred to the Museum of Vilnius Gaon, and in 2001 a division of this museum known as the Tolerance Center was opened here. It houses a permanent exhibition entitled 'A rescued child of Lithuanian Jews talks about Shoah'; art, cultural, historical and Jewish events, conferences, film screenings, and discussions on topics relevant to society take place here.



6. SAMUEL BAK MUSEUM

**Naugarduko g. 10/2, www.jmuseum.lt
I-IV 10:00-18:00, V 10:00-16:00, VII 10:00-16:00**

Housed in the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, this is the first museum in the world dedicated exclusively to the work of this famous Litvak artist. Samuel Bak was born in Vilnius in 1933 and his first exhibition was held in the Vilnius ghetto when he was just nine. According to the artist, Vilnius occupies a special place in his life and in his work.



7. VILNIUS CHORAL SYNAGOGUE

**Pylimo g. 39,
I-V 10:00-14:00**

The Choral Synagogue is the only synagogue in Vilnius that survived the Second World War without significant damage. The prayer house was designed by architect Dovydas Rozenhauzas and was opened during the 1903 Jewish New Year. There is an area on the second floor of the Mauritanian-style synagogue dedicated to women and the choir. Worshipping takes place every day; people pray in accordance to long-standing religious traditions.



8. MOYSHE KULBAK HOUSE

Karmelitų g. 5

The Jewish poet Moyshe Kulbak, who glorified Vilnius in his work, lived in this house in the 1920s.



9. ROMAI PRINTING HOUSE

A. Strazdelio g. 1

Over 100 books in Yiddish and Hebrew were published in this printing house. In 1830, the Bible was printed here; in 1835, publishing of the Talmud began.



10. JEWISH LABOUR CAMP

Subačiaus g. 47

During the Second World War on Vilnius Subačiaus Street, which now houses buildings 47 and 49, there was a labour camp known as HKP 562. Some 1,000 Jews were transported to this camp after the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto.

This camp is distinguished from the whole world by the fact that, after the war, it was neither destroyed, nor turned into a museum. People still live in these two simple apartment buildings.



11. ONA ŠIMAITĖ STREET

This street was named after Ona Šimaitė, a Vilnius University librarian who helped Jews during the Second World War. It stretches along Old Vilnius (near the Saffian Market) near the former Jewish Ghetto.



12. GREAT GHETTO

The Great Vilnius Ghetto existed from 6 September 1941, to 19 September 1943, within the boundaries of Lydos, Rūdninkų, Mėsinių, Ašmenos, Žemaitijos, Dysnos, Šiaulių and Ligoninės Streets. There were about 29,000 Jews living in it; most of them were murdered in Paneriai. The house located on Rūdninkų Street 18 marks the place where the main entrance to the ghetto was - this place is marked with a memorial plaque with the ghetto's layout. The quarter of Ašmenos, Dysnos and Mėsinių Streets was the first reconstructed site of Old Vilnius. Currently, the Jewish Cultural and Information Centre is located here. In 1921-1951, Žemaitijos Street was called Mattityahu Strashun Street. Books from the M.

Strašunas collection laid the foundation for the greatest library of Judaism in Europe, created in Vilnius in 1892. The library was destroyed along with the Great Synagogue. After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, the Vilnius ghetto liquidation day, September 23, became the day of the Jewish Genocide in Lithuania.



13. MONUMENT TO ZEMACH SHABAD

Rūdninkų g.

Zemach Shabad was a legendary man. The doctor worked in various fields, including charity (he was one of the leaders of the organisations that sponsored refugees), health care (an active member of the central educational organisation of Jews and one of the YIVO initiators), social activities and journalism.



14. PLACE OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE

Žydų g. 5

The Great Synagogue of Vilnius - the Spiritual and Cultural Life Centre of Lithuanian Jews - existed from the end of the 16th century until the Holocaust. Given its size and grandeur, this synagogue was well ahead of all other similar structures of the time and could host several thousand people. War and fires later damaged the synagogue. The architectural monument, which was also severely damaged, survived the Second World War, but it was later destroyed under Soviet rule. During recent excavations, archaeologists found the Bimah, the main chapel, as well as the floor slabs, which girdled the platform. Archaeologists

are still looking for the exterior building walls and want to find the original floor.



15. MONUMENT TO VILNA GAON

Žydų g. 5

Vilna Gaon Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797) was one of the most prominent Jewish wise men and a world-renowned Torah and Talmud researcher. Thanks to him, Vilnius became known as the Jerusalem of the North. Vilna Gaon's house was destroyed during the Second World War; a memorial plaque is mounted on the neighbouring house, and a monument by Kazimieras Valaitis stands nearby.



16. PLATE ON JEWISH STREET

Žydų g.

The Vilnius City Council unveiled street signs in different languages, named after cities or countries. Hebrew and Yiddish plates appeared on Jewish Street of the former Jewish Quarter.



17. SMALL GHETTO

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the intersection of Stiklių, Gaono and Žydų Streets was home to a glass market. At the time, it was possible to find several Jewish merchants and a wide variety of goods. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, the Jewish Quarter turned into the Small Ghetto that about 11,000 Jews were transferred to. The Small Ghetto was liquidated on 21 October 1941. The vast majority of Jews living in it were murdered.

Memorial Plates

As you walk along the streets of Vilnius Old Town pay attention to the copper memorial plates mounted in the pavement. They commemorate the eight honourable Vilnius citizens who died during

the Holocaust. It's no coincidence that these plates appear on Rūdninkų, Vokiečių, Vilniaus, Islandijos and Vasario 16 Streets - many prominent personalities serving the community lived and worked here: famous doctors, a chronicler of the Vilnius Ghetto, and the creators of the first town's vegetarian restaurant.



18. FORMER RABBI BOARD HOUSE

Corner of Šv. Ignoto g. and Benediktinų g.

The Supreme Rabbi board of the Great Vilnius Synagogue was considered one of the most important institutions of the Jewish community and was located in this building. In 1903, representatives of the community met here with Theodor Herzl, the patriarch of the national movement of Jews (Zionism); this event is immortalised on a memorial plaque.



19. VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Universiteto g. 3, www.vu.lt

03-10 I-VI 9:00-18:00, 11-04 I-VI 9:30-17:30

The Centre for Cultural Communities of Vilnius University is aimed at preserving Jewish heritage and spreading information about it. The university also hosts the Yiddish Institute, where the language is taught and Yiddish culture is fostered. The university's Yiddish Language and Literature Institute was founded in 1940, but it only operated until the start of the Second World War in Lithuania. Even within such a short time, the department

head, Noah Prylucki, was able to publish a book about the history of Jewish theatre. In 1866-1915, I.P. Trutnev's renowned art school operated in the university. It developed many artists and sculptors who later became internationally recognised, including Jacques Lipchitz, Naoum Aronson, and Chaim Soutine.



20. MONUMENT OF THE FORMER JEWISH CEMETERY

Olimpiečių g.

A special monument marks the place where the Jewish Cemetery in Šnipiškės once was.

Other Jewish Cemeteries:

- Former Jewish Cemetery in Olandų street
- Jewish public and religious figures rest in the cemetery.
- Jewish Cemetery in Sudervės street
- Perhaps the most prominent person buried here is the Vilna Gaon. In total, there are more than 70,000 people buried in the cemetery, which consists of a territory of 11 hectares.



21. C. SUGIHARA CHERRY GARDEN

Upės g.

In 2001, on the right bank of the Neris River near the White Bridge and next to the National Gallery of Arts, an alley of 200 Japanese Sakuras, also known as Japanese Cherry Trees, was planted. They are a gift to Vilnius from the Japanese Government for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Chiune Sugihara, a man who, during the Second World War, saved thousands of Jews from Lithuania, Poland and Germany.



22. MEMORIAL MUSEUM OF PANERIAI

Agrastų g. 15,

II-III 9:00-17:00, V, VII 9:00-16:00

Up to 70,000 people were killed in Paneriai during the massacres of the Second World War, most of them were Jews. It represents Europe's largest location of mass killings where the victims were shot. There are authentic pits on the territory of the memorial intended for the exhumation and burning of the Burning Brigade victims. In the Memorial Information Centre, you can learn more information about the tragic events that took place in Paneriai, the latest research into the memorial area, and can book a guided tour.

VILNIUS SYNAGOGUES

Before the Second World War, there were 135 synagogues in Vilnius. For the Jews of that time, they were not only prayer houses, but also important centres where they worked and studied. Most of the Jewish prayer houses were located in the Old Town of Vilnius, around the Great Vilnius Synagogue and its surroundings (Vokiečių, Gaon, and Stiklių Streets). Unfortunately, to this day, none of these buildings in the Old Town have survived; they were destroyed.

Of all the synagogues in Vilnius, only one, the Choral Synagogue on Pylimo Street, still functions today. Other, located on Gėlių Street, is currently being restored.

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THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

Yiddish is 1,000 years old. Having evolved in the German Jewish community, it later spread to other parts of Europe. In Eastern Europe, ordinary people and elites alike spoke Yiddish, and the language was used until World War II. At the beginning of the 20th century, Yiddish was first introduced as a means of expressing national identity and was a bearer of legitimate Jewish culture. "Lithuanian Yiddish" was formed at that time: it is a literary Yiddish variant based on the Northeast Yiddish dialect, spoken by Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews).

The linguist, language historian and dialectologist from Lithuania, and one of the founders of the Jewish Scientific Institute in Vilnius, Max Weinreich, played a significant role in the development of the Yiddish language. In 1936, the institute developed the first Yiddish orthographic standard, something many scholars from around the world had attempted since 1912.

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RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

There are 898 righteous people from Lithuania: Ona Šimaitė, Juozas Rutkauskas, Juozas Stakauskas, Vladas Žemaitis, Marija Mikulska, Karl Plagge, Anton Schmid.

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JEWISH PEOPLE IN VILNIUS

Lithuanian Jews or Litvaks, began dwelling in Vilnius in the 16th century, which is comparatively later than their establishment in other Lithuanian cities. In the city's Old Town, which has also been called the Jerusalem of North, an entire Jewish Quarter was formed where artists, philosophers, priests and ordinary Litvaks lived and worked. In the long run, Vilnius had become one of the largest Jewish cultural centres in Eastern and Central Europe.

The Litvaks left an especially deep trace in Israel - a significant part of Vilnius' Litvaks helped create the State of Israel. Many Litvaks have become prominent politicians and cultural actors in Israel.

Undoubtedly, Lithuania lost most of the Jewish population living in the country during the Second World War. As a result of the Holocaust, Lithuania lost more than 90% of its Jewish community. The community of Jews in Lithuania grew again in the 1980s and 1990s, when Jews from Russia moved to Lithuania to work and live. According to the Lithuanian population census in 2011, 3,050 inhabitants identified as Jewish.

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT LITHUANIAN JEWISH PERSONALITIES

Vilna Gaon Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman:

Vilna Gaon Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797) is one of the most prominent Litvaks and Jewish spiritual leaders who helped Vilnius become the centre of Jewish intellectual, cultural and political life. For god-fearing Jews, the name of Gaon is holy. On his grave, like on the Jerusalem Wailing Wall, many believers hang notes asking for the Lord's help. For the Jews of the world, the name of Gaon is also holy - they consider Gaon the most emblematic Litvak, a symbol of Jews, and their lives.

Samuel Bak:

Samuel Bak was born in Vilnius in 1933 and organised his first exhibition of paintings at the age of nine in the Vilnius Ghetto. Having thankfully survived the Nazi occupation, he found himself in a displaced persons camp in Germany, before immigrating to Israel and later Western Europe. In 1993, the artist settled in the United States where he continues his creative journey. Bak creates in the allegorical realism style; his work raises issues of historical and moral justice.

Mark Antokolsky:

Mark (Mordkukh) Antokolsky (1843-1902) was a famous Jewish sculptor born in Vilnius. His early work depicts Jewish history and everyday life. His first recognition, a second-degree silver medal, was awarded to the young sculptor for his bas-relief created in Vilnius entitled Jewish Tailor. In 1871, Antokolsky created his famous sculpture Ivan the Terrible, which brought recognition to the artist and made him rich. This work was purchased by the Alexander II of Russia and transferred to the Hermitage. Spinoza (1881), Mephistopheles (1884), Yaroslav the Wise (1889), Nestor the Chronicler (1889), and Yermak Timofeyevich (1891) are among his other well-known works that have received global recognition. Antakolsky's work, which treated a wide variety of topics (antiquity, Christianity, history and ethnic subjects), was presented at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1890 and received the highest award - the Legion of Honour.

Romain Gary:

Romain Gary (1914-1980) was a French writer and diplomat of Jewish origin, born in Vilnius, who lived there for four years. Gary (whose real name was Roman Kacev) wrote more than 30 literary works. The author signed his works with two names: Romain Gary and Emile Ajar.

The writer became famous thanks to the novel European Education, which takes place during World War II in the German-occupied Vilnius region and Vilnius, which at the time belonged to Poland. The prestigious Goncourt Prize was awarded to the writer for his book The Roots of Heaven (1956). The writer received his second Goncourt Prize for the novel The Life Before Us, which he signed using his Emile Ajar pseudonym. This book has since become one of the most precious French novels of the 20th century.

Jascha Heifetz:

Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987) is one of the most famous violinists of the 20th century, a virtuoso and a wunderkind, born in Vilnius, which belonged to the Russian Empire at the time. Heifetz, who is often referred to as the king of violin or the Paganini of the 20th century, first took up the violin at the age of three. The young violinist organised his first solo concert when he was just 8 years old, and had already performed in Germany, Austria and Scandinavia by the time he was 11. The violin virtuoso also made his own compositions, plays for violin and piano, and many recordings.

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