Shtetls and Their Stories

We invite you to take a walk around the old Litvak shtetls – towns where large, active and innovative Jewish communities lived before the Holocaust. The main squares and central streets of these settlements, their old houses or newly installed memorials today remind of the intertwining daily life of the Litvaks and local Lithuanians, Poles, Russians and other ethnic groups.

2 DARBĖNAI

6 TELŠIAI

5 JONIŠKIS

9 LINKUVA

10 PAKRUOJIS

14 ROKIŠKIS

1 ŠEDUVA

13 MOLĖTAI

4 UKMERGĖ

3 KĖDAINIAI

8 ŽIEŽMARIAI

7 MARIJAMPOLĖ

12 ALYTUS

15 VALKININKAI

11 MERKINĖ
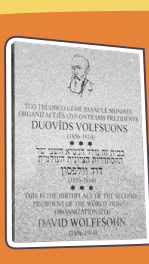
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1 ŠEDUVA
55.755011, 23.758701

The roots of the Jewish community of Šeduva can be traced back to the beginning of the 18th century when the town was going through rapid economic development after receiving the Magdeburg rights. In 1880, Jews already made up more than half of the total Šeduva's population. The source of income for the local Jews was various crafts, small trade, and agriculture. Community life in the end of the 19th century revolved around the yeshiva founded by Rabbi Joseph Leiba Bloch. During the interwar period, the economic activity of Šeduva Jews, that was mostly developing in the main square of the town, differed little from what they used to do in the decades before the war. Jewish doctors, dentists, pharmacists, photographers, hairdressers, bakers and other skilled professionals provided services to the entire town's community, and the doors of the Jewish People's Bank were open to all customers, regardless of their nationality or religion.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Šeduva boasts a unique, conveniently arranged and well-maintained shtetl heritage site. Today, one can visit the restored old Šeduva Jewish cemetery (with about 1,300 matzevahs), the three sites of the Šeduva Jewish massacre, as well as a monument to the memory of all Jews who used to live in Šeduva, right in the center of the town.

2 DARBĖNAI
56.02042, 21.250876

Jews settled in Darbėnai in the middle of the 18th century – in 1764 twenty Jewish houses were counted. Most of them were situated around the town's market square, businesses were also concentrated here, and in 1781 a synagogue had already been built. In the 19th century the current streets of Laukžemė, Vaineikių and Skuodo became more densely populated. In the interwar period, Jews accounted for about 40 percent of the town's population and the Tarbut School was established. The town has preserved its unique layout of the streets and the market square, where the Jews of Darbėnai used to sell fish, flax and various small objects on the market day, and practiced handicrafts in the buildings surrounding the square. To this day, an impressive Jewish cemetery, which reminds visitors of the town's past, has survived in Darbėnai.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Today, this small town and the state of Israel are connected by a symbol of a great importance – the flag of Israel. Its author, David Wolfson (1856-1914), who designed the flag of the Zionist movement, began his life's journey in Darbėnai. Here one can also see the wooden house where this famous Litvak was born, marked by a memorial plaque.

3 KĖDAINIAI
55.287527, 23.981578

In 1627, seeking to revive the town's economy, Krzysztof Radziwiłł, the owner of Kėdainiai, started inviting hard-working people of different denominations to work and thrive in his city. Jews were allowed to settle in only a few streets of what today is Kėdainiai's Old Town. The Jews soon built a wooden synagogue, a hospital, and a mikveh. In 1666 Bogusław Radziwiłł formed a special quarter (including the areas already inhabited by Jews) consisting of Žydų Street and the right side of Kreivoji Street (now Smilgos Street) with the Old Market Square as the centre of the quarter, where inns, craft workshops and various stores were concentrated. In 1781 the square was destroyed by fire. A few years later, a new Great Synagogue made from bricks was built in place of the wooden one and it has survived till today. The smaller Kėdainiai synagogue was built in the beginning of the 19th century. At the same time, a butcher shop was set up in the building opposite the Great Synagogue, which the locals called "the slaughterman's house". Part of this building was also used as a detention centre.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Today the building of the Small Synagogue hosts the Multicultural Centre of the Kėdainiai Regional Museum, which will highlight the history of Kėdainiai Jews, and the building of the Great Synagogue is now home to the town's children's art school. To this day, the impressive neoclassical Grand Kloiz, the construction of which was funded by the richest tailor of the town, Ilya Vilner, proudly stands in the town of Kėdainiai.

4 UKMERGĖ
55.251005, 24.761165

The Jewish community of Ukmergė was first mentioned in 1685. It grew fast in the end of the 18th century and in later years accounted for more than half of the city's population. The Jews of Ukmergė settled at the foot of the castle, where the current castle mound is situated, and from the 19th century the Jewish quarter was formed around the Great Synagogue (now Vienuolyno Str.). Jews concentrated around the central city square (now Kęstutis sq.) as well as Žuvų Street, in the market square and the streets leading to it, which were convenient for the development of trade and crafts. The inscription of the Chaja Galaitė-Oguzienė store still remaining on the building No. 7 at Žuvų Street reminds us of various Jewish shops that used to thrive in the market square. As a significant part of the city's population, Ukmergė Jews had several houses of worship, educational institutions of a secular and religious nature, and cultural societies. They were also actively involved in social and charitable activities. The building of the orphanage founded by Sol Rosenblum has survived till today, as well as the house of the former Talmud Torah school (1884-1941) for the education of underprivileged children. The construction of this school was financed by the rich owner of the leather factory located in Šiauliai, Chaim Frenkel (1857-1920).

PLACES OF INTEREST: The most important religious site of the Ukmergė Jewish community was the Great Synagogue, built around the second half of the 18th century. During the Soviet era, the interior of the synagogue was destroyed and remodelled, and a gym was set up there, which operates here to this day. A memorial plaque to the famous Jewish educator, writer and influential Jewish political thinker Moshe Leib Lilienblium (1843–1910), who lived in Ukmergė, is affixed to the wall of the synagogue.

5 JONIŠKIS
56.240237, 23.616825

Jews began moving to Joniškis in great numbers only in the end of the 18th century, following the lifting of the ban on trading in that city. They settled mainly in the Market Square (now the City Square) and in the surrounding streets. At the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century, Jews were often the first to apply various innovations and start new businesses. During the interwar period, a few Jews in Joniškis even started a completely new business. For example, they began selling petrol in the shops around the market square, primarily for servicing shuttle buses. Two of them had installed modern Shell and Dapolin gasoline stations, which stood in the middle of the current City Square. Jews also often became the first city photographers. In the interwar period, Jakovas Fišeris was a famous photographer in Joniškis, who also set up the first cinema in the city, "Lyra".

PLACES OF INTEREST: To this day, a complex of two brick synagogues has survived in Joniškis. The so-called White synagogue was built in 1864-1865. The synagogue, built in the late classicist and romantic styles with a number of the baroque elements, is so pretty that it was called "The Beautiful One" in the 20th century. It operated in the summer season, whereas in winter, the community gathered nearby, in the so-called Red Synagogue. Built after 1911, the building has also survived to this day. Today, these synagogues belong to the Joniškis Regional Museum and are used for public purposes.

6 TELŠIAI
55.984947, 22.251256

Jews in Telšiai settled in the northern outskirts of the market. The present Respublikos Street was inhabited exclusively by the Jews, most of whom were engaged in trade and crafts. In the second half of the 19th century, Jews made up as much as half of the city's population. In Telšiai, where the Jewish community was famous for its orthodoxy, before the Second World War there were 4 synagogues: the brick Great Synagogue, the three-storey beit midrash of the rich, the brick beit midrash of the officers and the wooden beit midrash for craftsmen, all of which have survived to the present day. The large Jewish community of Telšiai was very active in many ways between the wars – there was a Jewish bank, library, several charitable organizations, and a sports club. The building of the Jewish hospital built in 1930 still stands today. Telšiai was famous as the second town (after Telšiai) in the territory of Lithuania where photographers started working. Among them was Chaimas Kaplanskis (1860-1935) and his daughter Feitska, who was not only the first female photographer in Telšiai, but also one of the first female photographers in Lithuania. There was also the photo studio "Menas" owned by F. Boruchovičius, and "Dailė" photo salon founded by H. Leibovičius, and many other photography establishments. Many episodes of the Jews' life in Telšiai can be seen in the collection of the Samogitian Museum "Alka", and one of the most well-known Jewish photo studios used to be located in the building which still stands in Kęstučio Street No. 3.

PLACES OF INTEREST: In 1875, at the initiative of young rabbis, the Telšiai yeshiva, which gained fame worldwide during the interwar period, was founded. The success of this yeshiva is associated with another personality, Rabbi Eliezer Gordon (1841-1910), who in 1883 became the leader of the establishment. He was the first in Lithuania to apply modern teaching methods. During the Second World War, after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, the place was shut down, but the name of the yeshiva itself and its tradition were moved to the USA, where a yeshiva named after the town of Telšiai still operates in Cleveland. A building reminiscent of the rich history of this exceptional place has survived in Telšiai.

7 MARIJAMPOLĖ
54.556062, 23.351519

The history of Marijampolė city since its establishment in the middle of 18th century is closely intertwined with the history of the Lithuanian Jewish community. In the second half of the 19th century Jews settled in the town's centre, near the market square. In the middle of the 19th century, they made up the majority of the townspeople. The Jews formed the basis of the Marijampolė firefighting team, had their own primary school, kindergarten, charity, social assistance societies, theatre and library. The year of 1919 was a key period in the history of the Jewish community of Marijampolė, as at that time the first school where the Hebrew was the language of instruction was set up in the whole territory of Lithuania, which became an example for other Lithuanian schools of this type. The most prominent area in which the Jews of Marijampolė region stood out in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was photography, the beginning of which dates back to 1873, when Leonas Anšeras opened the first studio in the city. The image of one of the most famous historical personalities of Lithuania who came from Marijampolė, Jonas Basanavičius (1851-1927), was captured in one of the photos taken in the studio.

PLACES OF INTEREST: To this day, the buildings of three brick synagogues have survived – the best-preserved one is the Hakhnasat Orhim synagogue, which now houses the Marijampolė Meilė Lukšienė Education Centre. The surviving buildings of the Great Synagogue and Beit Midrash have been partially preserved; however, they are currently not in use.

8 ŽIEŽMARIAI
54.803795, 24.444538

Žiežmariai is one of the oldest settlements in Lithuania, according to some sources, dating back to 1348. It seems that the first Jews-Karaites settled here in the 16th century, but later the community disappeared. Only in the 17th century rabbinical Jews reappeared in the town, although Bishop Konstanty Kazimierz Brzostowski (1644-1722) of Vilnius forbade local Jews to build a synagogue. Still, wooden Jewish houses of worship were constructed in Žiežmariai, only later, around 1738. As the community grew, so did the number of synagogues, and in the end of the nineteenth century there were three of them, the old beit midrash and the new one as well as the prayer house of Hasidic Jews. Unfortunately, in 1918 a great fire destroyed all the Jewish houses of worship in the town. Despite the troubles, the Jewish community of Žiežmariai was active in the interwar period – in 1922 they opened several orphanages, a Tarbut Primary School, where Hebrew was the language of instruction, as well as, an amateur theatre, a community library named after Yehuda Leib Peretz, and the "Maccabi" Sports Club.

PLACES OF INTEREST: The surviving wooden beit midrash is a unique heritage object, part of the building dates back to the end of the 19th century, when it was built. Both outside and inside the building, a clear division of the space into a men's prayer hall and a women's gallery remain, and even fragments of old drawings adorning the interior can be seen.

9 LINKUVA
56.085791, 23.970335

In written sources Linkuva's name appeared as early as the 16th century. The road to Bauska and Riga passed through this settlement. A favourable geographical position and city status were factors that lead to a significant population of Jews settling in the town in the 18th century. Eventually, a large and strong Jewish community developed in Linkuva. Their number increased significantly in the 19th century and at the dawn of the First World War Jews made up the majority of the town's population. The Jews in the Linkuva area owned several mills. The most legendary one was the mill of Kalpokai, built at the end of the 19th century. According to the locals, it belonged to the Jew named Šeras. The wooden mill has burned down, but the brick windmill built in its place, where authentic technical equipment is stored, survived to this day.

PLACES OF INTEREST: After their wooden synagogue burned down, the Jews of the town built a brick one in 1890. The building was turned into a cinema during the Soviet era and its interior was damaged, nevertheless, it is worth taking a look at. Visitors can spot the surviving red brick ornamentation of the synagogue's exterior with the date of the synagogue's construction.

10 PAKRUOJIS
55.97914, 23.849937

The town of Pakruojis was founded in the beginning of the 16th century. After the 18th century wars with Sweden and Russia and the plague that followed, the town suffered from the depopulation and economic decline, therefore Jews were allowed to settle in Pakruojis. In the 19th century, the Jewish community of Pakruojis grew rapidly and made up the majority of the town's population. In 1801 a wooden synagogue was built away from the surrounding houses. It stood out because of its volume, and soon enough eventually an entire shulhof grew next to it, but its other buildings have not survived to this day. Many famous personalities of Lithuania worked and lived in Pakruojis, such as Dr. Markas Šreiberis (his house has survived) and Frida Šapiro, who managed the hotel "Europe". Successful industrial entrepreneurs, brothers D. and Š. Meizeliai, lived in Pakruojis and thanks to their effort, the economic importance of the town increased. It was because of their initiative that an electric power plant, a factory and a printing house appeared in Pakruojis. The characteristic printing house building has survived in the central part of the town.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Pakruojis Synagogue is the oldest surviving wooden synagogue in Lithuania, notable for by Jewish folk art forms and interiors. In 1895, after the renovation of the synagogue's women's gallery, among other traditional Jewish art motifs, a technical miracle of the era was painted – a steam locomotive pulling several train cars, symbolizing the journey to the Promised Land. These days, the synagogue is well preserved and awaits visitors interested in its beautifully restored interior.

11 MERKINĖ
54.163446, 24.183766

Merkinė was first mentioned in the middle of the 13th century as a royal city established on important sections of the roads Kaunas-Grodno and Vilnius-Warsaw. Sources indicate that in the 15th-16th centuries custom fees were collected by Jews in the city, but probably an organized Jewish community settled in Merkinė around the 17th century. Documents dating back to the end of the 18th century state that the Jews had a synagogue and a study house as well as a cemetery in Merkinė, and in the long run the Jews ended up owning most of the plots around the market square and the main streets. Merkinė had a compound of three synagogues, consisting of a synagogue, a kloiz and a beit midrash. To this day, there is a partially preserved kloiz building, which was probably built at the turn of the century. Jews dominated both the trade and the crafts' sector of the city, there were many shops, small businesses, mills, sawmills and factories; the community had their own schools, a library, and many organizations, including a volunteer fire brigade that even had its own orchestra. In 1918-1919 three Merkinė Jews fought for Lithuania's independence and were later awarded by President Antanas Smetona for their merits to Lithuania.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Thanks to the local Jews, there were plenty of innovations in Merkinė, one of them was a water tower designed and built in the city on the initiative of A. Z. Raizneris – the tower provided running water to local households. It is worth visiting the Merkinė Regional Museum where the history of the town's Jewish population is presented in great detail.

12 ALYTUS
54.40097, 24.04806

It is not known when exactly the first Jews settled in Alytus, but in the 18th century there definitely was a substantial community. Until 1915 the city was divided into two separate territorial units: Alytus I and Alytus II, and even though such administrative division no longer existed in the interwar period, two different Jewish communities remained in both parts of the city. This is reflected by the fact that the communities had separate houses of worship, cemeteries and rabbis. During the interwar period, Jews made up about a third of the city's population and took an active part in both the cultural and political life of the city. For example, Jews were also members of the Alytus City Council, and in 1922 Kolepas Šulmanas briefly served as mayor of the city. In Alytus, the Jews owned printing houses, hotels, mills, a power station, sawmills, a machine company, a lemonade factory, and many other companies that provided services and goods to Alytus' population. During the interwar period, there were not one, but two cinemas in Alytus: "Palas" (owned by Dveirė Šulmanienė) and "Capitol Cinema" (built in 1929). Both unique red brick buildings have survived to this day. One of the most prominent representatives of the city's intelligentsia was the public lawyer Mendelis Bokšickis (1898-1941). His wife Šeinė led the Zionist women's organization for some time. Bokšickis was a member of the city council, he founded and for some time managed the Alytus police force, set up a volunteer fire brigade, and conducted training for other fire brigades. He designed non-freezing and non-silting underground water tanks for firefighters, which was a major innovation at the time, even internationally. The main staircase of the Bokšickis family house (built in 1911), which has survived on Vilniaus Street, is beautifully decorated with lion figures.

PLACES OF INTEREST: After the fires that devastated the city in 1911, the brick-style Alytus synagogue was built (it is believed that in total there were three synagogues in the city before the Holocaust) as well as the rabbi's house. The Alytus Synagogue, which has been preserved to this day, is currently being restored and will soon open its doors to visitors.

13 MOLĖTAI
55.23203, 25.419956

Jews settled in Molėtai in the beginning of the 18th century. This fact is confirmed by a permit signed in 1728 by the bishop of Vilnius for Jews to build a synagogue in the town. Many Jews engaged in inn-keeping, which they would set up at the most important sections of the road. In the middle of the 19th century the Jewish population reached 1,000, and in the end of the century the number doubled (Jews accounted for about 80% of the total town's population). Until the Second World War, Jews remained the dominant group of Molėtai residents. During the interwar period, most buildings in the central part of Molėtai (now Vilniaus and Turgaus streets) were owned by Jews, there were various shops, four restaurants, amateur workshops, the Jewish People's Bank and other service and trade companies.

PLACES OF INTEREST: A red brick commercial building in Vilniaus Street (built in 1933-1936) that used to house several Jewish shops. The Jews of Molėtai were active in the social and cultural scene: there were 5 schools, a library, 4 houses of prayer, a branch of the Union of Jewish Soldiers who participated in the Lithuanian War of Independence, and local youth, sports and theatre groups. The house of Icikas Charifas has survived to this day, at first it had a restaurant, later it was turned into the first cinema of Molėtai, "Oasis". There are two adjacent brick houses on Vilniaus Street that used to belong to local Jews. Bazelis Levinas and Ruvelis Videckis used to live there, there was also a shop in the basement.

14 ROKIŠKIS
55.962609, 25.585398

Jews came to live in Rokiškis as early as the 17th century. In 1873 with the construction of the railway, the number of Jews in the city began to grow rapidly. According to the general census of 1923 at that time there were 2013 Jews in Rokiškis, which accounted for 47% of the town's overall population. During the interwar period, Jews actively developed their businesses, mostly various shops, workshops and enterprises that belonged to them. The proximity to Latvia provided excellent opportunities for the development of export and import of different goods. In the interwar years, small factories and workshops were established: Jofe established a candy factory, the Meleriai brothers set up a printing house and a saccharin and cardboard factory, moreover, they also owned a hotel "London", whereas the Zametai brothers opened an iron processing workshop "Litmetal". It is said that the Zametai were probably the richest people in Rokiškis town, their house stood out with its elegance and it has survived in a good condition to this day.

PLACES OF INTEREST: In 2015 an information stand was installed on Rokiškis' Sinagogų Street to commemorate the synagogues that used to stand here. Walking down Sinagogų Street one may notice an old wooden house – this was where the rabbi once lived. The two-story building has remained almost completely unchanged to this day, both inside and outside, despite the fact, that it was constantly inhabited by various people with their own habits and unique way of life. The houses on the current Sinagogų, Vytauto, Respublikos, Pirties, Mikėno and Kauno streets, where Jews once lived and traded remind us of a once vibrant Jewish community that populated the town. To this day, a large Rokiškis Jewish cemetery has survived – you will find it a bit away from the town centre.

15 VALKININKAI
54.358408, 24.841159

The town of Valkininkai developed on an important road connecting Vilnius, Grodno and Warsaw, and was surrounded by the hunting grounds of the Grand Duke of Lithuania. In 1571 the settlement was granted the rights of Magdeburg, and the Jewish community began settling in the town from the first half of the 17th century. This was mainly due to the town's convenient geographic location, favourable attitude of its rulers and its economic potential. Until the Second World War, Jews provided accommodation and other services for the vacationers who came to rest in the surrounding area. The number of Jews kept growing steadily all the time, despite several rather difficult periods. The largest community here was at the end of the 19th century, when it consisted of more than 1,000 Jews, about half of the town's overall population.

PLACES OF INTEREST: Valkininkai is rich in examples of wooden architecture. During the Soviet era, the almost unchanged structure of the town preserved the original buildings' layout, and most of the wooden houses remained, including those that used to belong to Jews. However, perhaps the town's most impressive monument of wooden architecture, The Great Synagogue of Valkininkai, has not survived. This synagogue, along with another one standing next to it, burned down in 1941, after Nazi Germany occupied Lithuania. It is believed that the Great Synagogue stood on a slope descending from the market square, now Dzūkų Str. 11.