

The History of the Jewish Cemetery in Memel / Klaipėda

Lecture by Prof. Ruth Leiserowitz, delivered on “Voices That Have Faded Away” Day on July 30, 2026, to mark the unveiling of new informational displays on the grounds.



This is a briefly History of the cemetery, which dates back 191 years. Although large numbers of Jews had been coming to the city for trade for many centuries, the city's merchants, in particular, sought to prevent them from settling here permanently. Even after the 1812 Prussian edict, the city authorities delayed issuing residence permits, even as the Jewish population gradually grew. In the early 19th century, the community consisted mainly of Litvaks, timber merchants from Memel, and kosher cooks from nearby towns in Samogitia. (Regarding the history of the cemetery, earlier events related to Jews, such as the presence of Moses Jacobsohn de Jonge, are of no significance.)

Therefore, the story begins in 1835, when several Jews raised money and purchased a plot of land near the city walls to establish a cemetery. (Not only was the cemetery located in the ramparts, but the Jewish hospital and synagogue on Kehr wiederstraße were also situated within the ramparts.)

Joel, a merchant from Königsberg, donated a large sum of money to the cemetery. Moses Wald and Aron Cohn, Jews living in the area, were registered as the owners, since there was not yet a registered congregation that could act as the owner. As the Jewish population in Memel continued to grow in the mid-19th century, representatives of the still-unofficial Jewish congregation—Dr. Isidor Laaser, a physician, and Samuel Hertz Berlowitz, a merchant—purchased an additional plot of land for the cemetery in 1858. These two men represented the Jews of East Prussia, who had now also settled there. However, problems arose because the existing part of the cemetery was fenced off and locked. Aron Cohn, a Litvak who held the key, would only hand it over for a fee. However, the dispute was later resolved, and the separate sections of the cemetery were merged. A morgue was then built. The cemetery caretaker's office was located in the same building. Feiwel Rappoport worked there for many years. He was originally from Kėdainiai.



In 1862, the Prussian government approved the statutes of the synagogue congregation and the Chevrah Kadishah burial society. This was significant because the Jewish congregation was growing steadily. When Rabbi Dr. Isaak Rülff arrived in 1865, life in the Jewish congregation also began to intensify. In 1842, there were 69 Jews living in Memel; in 1875, there were 1.040; and by 1880, the number had risen to 1.214. In 1870, Rabbi Rülff founded a Jewish hospital, which was initially located across from the “Polish” synagogue. Thanks to generous donations from Paris and Nice, a new building for the Jewish hospital was opened in 1896 (You all know it—today, this building houses the Klaipėda Mental Health Center). This hospital was intended primarily to treat Jews from small towns in Lithuania, from which a large number of patients arrived. Unfortunately, for many, treatment came too late, which is why a great many Jews from

other regions are buried in this cemetery. The influx of Jewish patients continued until the spring of 1939. In addition, there were occasional instances of a businessman dying while on a business trip to Memel, or a person who was merely passing through on their way to emigrate.



On the documents paper, there was **one** Jewish congregation, but from the mid-19th century onward, it always had two rabbis—one of Prussian origin and the other of Litvak descent. There were also several synagogues, but only one shared cemetery. When particularly important figures were buried—such as Jakob Werblowsky, one of the owners of the large cigarette factory—both rabbis would attend together. In 1920, the “Bet Tahara” ritual services building was constructed, which we know today from historical photographs. In the 1930s, life for the Jewish community became quite turbulent. An attack had already taken place at the cemetery, during which gravestones were overturned. Among the photographs in the exhibition is one showing members of “Bet Hechalutz” participating in a work party at the Jewish cemetery in 1935. I believe this was a cleanup effort

following that attack.

In 1939, the Klaipėda Region was annexed to Germany, and the Jews left Klaipėda. The Klaipėda Jewish community managed this cemetery until March 1939. At that time, the area was confiscated by the authorities of Nazi Germany. However, a few Jews remained in the city. One of them—Hirsch Grinker, a native of Kretinga—died in Memel on October 28, 1939; another died in November of the same year. I believe they were also buried here.

We do not know exactly what happened at the cemetery between 1940 and 1947. It is possible that even then, gravestones were being removed to be used as building material—but we do not know for certain (A Jewish gravestone was recently found near the “Akropolis” shopping center. It turned out that it came from this cemetery and had adorned the grave of Shay Jacobson, a merchant originally from Darbenai).

The ritual building located in the cemetery was referred to as a “synagogue” in postwar Soviet documents. In 1947, it was transferred to a fishing expedition company to serve as a workshop for knitting fishing nets. In 1950, the building, along with a 0.75-hectare plot of land, was transferred to the city’s veterinary inspection office. Indeed, starting in 1954, a communications service operated on this site, dedicated to jamming signals from foreign radio stations. The Soviet authorities sought to prevent residents from listening to “Voice of America,” “BBC,” “Radio Free Europe,” or “Kol Israel.” During the construction of the antenna complex, most of the tombstones



(matzevot) from the old Jewish cemetery were destroyed and used as building material. In 1988, following the termination of the radio signal jamming program, the facility’s operations were suspended. This was already part of the perestroika process. In November 1988, a Jewish cultural community was established. It was

called “SHALOM.” Its founder and chairman was Jakov Rikleris. In 1989, the city council granted

Jews permission to use the cemetery grounds. They renovated the building, and since then, the Jews of Klaipėda have had a home of their own.

In 1991, the Klaipėda Jewish Community was registered. After regaining independence, on November 7, 1990, the Presidium of the Supreme Council adopted a resolution stating that the graves of Holocaust victims and Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania must be marked and maintained. Based on this resolution, restoration of the Memel Jewish cemetery began in March 1991. The radio station's antennas were dismantled, and on May 10, the remains of the people found there were reburied. In 1992, the site was landscaped according to a design by architect Saulius Manomaitis. As you can see, all the gravestones found were integrated into this "Wailing Wall". On the initiative of Arkady Lichtinshain and Samuil Kvasha, Lithuania's first Avenue of the Righteous was established here. In 2018, a court ruling confirmed the community's rights to the building. Today, the cemetery building houses a synagogue.



On display here today are the foundations of one of the four-legged antennas—a surviving fragment of the former antenna complex that bears witness to the history of the Cold War and the complex past of this place. If you examine the Matzevot fragments closely, you can learn even more. For example, I found a piece from the tombstone of the mother of the well-known Consul Nafthal. Her name was Ella Nafthal, and her maiden name was Sussmanowitz.

As you can see, this place—called "Bet Olam" in Hebrew, meaning "House of Eternity"—brings together countless stories. By incorporating new elements and the photographs being presented today, we can tell these many episodes of history even more effectively.

