

From the Bordertown out into the World. Jews in Memel/Klaipėda

Organised by:

Jews in East Prussia. Association for Culture and History, Institute for Archaeology and History of the Baltic Region, (University of Klaipėda), Klaipėda Jewish Community

Sponsored by: Litvakų fondas, German Culture Ministry

Arrival in the town. The golden years of the Crimean War

The Edict of Emancipation issued in 1812 awarded the Prussian Jews citizenship, and guaranteed them freedom of movement and of trade. There followed a settlement in Memel primarily of Jewish wood traders who came from the Žemaitija and the headwater of the Memel. When local trade with Russia reached unexpected heights due to the blockade of the Black Sea ports during the Crimean War (1853-1856), more and more seasonal traders decided to become citizens. In 1855 289 Jews lived in Memel, but as early as 1867 the figure was 887.

Life by the Memel. New communities come into being

The Jews had resided from as early as the 18th century in localities along the Memel such as Schmallingken and Ruß which had survived from wood trade for a long time. They founded their own communities and had synagogues built. There was a double migration to these small towns, for

instance to Heydekrug. Jews from West Prussia immigrated here, but also Litvaks from the East. Moreover, there were also frequently marriages "across the border".

A community open to dialogue. The work of Isaak Rülff and Israel Lipkin Salant

The East-West dialogue unfolded most fruitfully in Memel. Here the German rabbi Isaac Rülff (1831-1902) was active. Among other things, he had a school and a hospital built for the community, wrote for the papers and was involved in supporting the Russian Jews. Here the rabbinic scribe Israel Lipkin Salant (1810-1883), the founder of the Mussar movement, taught. He lived in the town from 1860-1880 and similarly created various publications.

Growth in the face of resistance. The expulsions of 1885

In 1885 a decree of the German government was brought into force in Memel that all foreign Jews had to leave the town at short notice. Those to be expelled included many who had lived in the location for 20-40 years. The rabbi Dr. Rülff pulled all the possible strings and appealed to Bismarck three times. He succeeded in avoiding the worst. However, while in 1880 1214 Jews had lived in Memel, in 1890 their number dropped to 861. Many of those expelled tried their luck in Great Britain, South Africa or the USA.

On the road to integration. The struggle for citizenship

At the eve of the First World War around 2000 Jews lived in Memel, including many who contributed considerably to the economic power of the city, but had had to live without citizenship for generations. The only way to obtain Prussian citizenship was via military service

Livelihood in the countryside. Between crisis and bankruptcy

The end of the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles changed the region considerably. In the newly formed Memel area, which had come into being for the first time, the Lithuanian-Polish conflict disrupted Memel shipping. First the sawmills went bankrupt. The other business also suffered from the poor economic situation. Whoever found an opportunity left the area, and even the continent.

A part of Lithuania. The economic oasis

Due to the opening up of the Lithuanian hinterland from 1923 onwards and the excess production there, the export of flax rose rapidly. There was an upturn in the foodstuffs and stimulants industries, particularly also in the tobacco processing and textile industry. The Jewish economic power was clearly noticeable in all of the domains mentioned. The town became a magnet for Litvakian entrepreneurial families who were returning from Russian banishment.

Sport for the young. Bar Kochba

Klaipėda's Jewish society was linguistically and culturally very varied. All of the young, however, enthusiastically took part in sporting activities together in the Bar Kochba club. Club members attained some of the top places in the Memel region competitions, and even took part in the world Maccabiade competitions. The fifteenth anniversary of the sporting club demonstrated clearly the position of Jewish life in the city.

Hachsharah. To Palastine via Klaipėda

At the end of the twenties Memel became a centre for the training and emigration of thousands of Zionist pioneers from Lithuania. The Jewish community had a "Beth He Halutz" built and provided apprenticeships and jobs in nearby properties, factories and workshops. After 1933 young people from Germany also came here to prepare for their emigration. Here the life plans of Lithuanian and German Jews met, rubbed against each other and sometimes produced a new synthesis.

First omens. Swastikas in Klaipėda

In February 1937 the town council of Memel put into effect a law which restricted Jews' opportunities to practise a profession. Far-sighted citizens began at this early stage to sound out the possibilities of emigration. After the lifting of the state of emergency on 1 November 1938, the Memel order-keeping force

marched through the streets. The area's return to Germany was only a matter of time. The news of the November pogrom in the neighbouring country intensified the pressure on Jews to emigrate. As early as 1/12/1938 the Directory forbade all clearance sales, yet nonetheless the dissolution of Jewish businesses increased. The Jews left the city.

Between two fates. Flight from Memel

On the 23 March 1939 the Memel area was connected to Germany once again by an ultimatum. The last Jews fled from Memel. Many settled down in the small towns just behind the border, but most went to Kaunas, then the Lithuanian capital, where they desperately looked for emigration possibilities. However, these plans were thwarted by the breaking out of the Second World War a few months later: after the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940 the last opportunities to flee were taken away. In June 1941 Jews from the Memel countryside were also taken away in the deportations to Siberia.

Murder at the border. The Tilsit taskforce

On 23 June 1941 members of the SS taskforce and the uniformed police murdered 200 Jewish men in the neighbouring town of Gargždai. This first mass shooting was followed by more in Kretinga, Jurbarkas and other places. By the end of September 5500 Jewish men, women and children had been murdered on the Lithuanian border strip, including

numerous Memel Jews. In many cases the murderers knew their victims.

Kaddish for Klaipėda

By 15 August 1941 the Jews from Kaunas had to move into a ghetto. It has not been investigated to date how many of the 29 000 came from Klaipėda. Almost all of the children were murdered in the same year; only a few managed to flee - to a Lithuanian hiding place. In July 1944 the ghetto was liquidised and the survivors were sent on transport vehicles to the concentration camps in Stutthof and Dachau, where only a few survived the gruelling conditions.

Distant perspective. Memories

Former Memel Jews today live scattered over the whole world. In contrast to the Jewish inhabitants of other places, they are not connected by any association of their own. Their memories differ very greatly. Those who were able to emigrate before the war associate happy childhood years with Memel, but those who survived the holocaust in Lithuania and Germany bear a deep shadow over their past for all of their lives.

Many thanks to all the institutions and individuals who contributed to the success of this exhibition: George Birman, Shoshannah Eckerling, Dov Galmor-Geier, Eva Glass, Cherie Goren, Miriam Itzigsohn, Rachel Itzigsohn, William Kaplan, Mike Kelly, Hannah Kochavi, Ulla Lachauer, Marion Landau, Isaak Lipman, David Lisbona, Mika Rabinowitz, Edith Rudeitzky, Isábel Rosenberg, Edgar Sass, Ivar Segalowitz, Hanna Simon, Hilde Sturmman, Karin Vinogradzky, Hektoras Vitkus and special thanks to the Pranas Domšaitis Gallery.