

Introduction

To this day today Jewish history in Lithuania in general and Jewish-Lithuanian relations in particular are a matter of controversy and debate between Jews and Lithuanians as well as among Lithuanians themselves.

The land of Lithuania, once the cradle of a variety of developments in the social, religious, and cultural history of Ashkenazi Jewry, was turned into the deathbed of hundreds of thousands of Jews not only from Lithuania itself, but also from other European countries. The remarkable Lithuanian Jewish community, which once occupied a prominent place in the Jewish world and constituted a unique part of the Jewish world community, is no more. All that remains is memory. Within a few months at the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1941 Nazi executioners and their local collaborators murdered almost all Lithuanian Jews. Only very few of them had a chance to escape and survive the Holocaust.

The history of the Jews in Lithuania covers more than six hundred years. Its beginnings date back to the 14th century. From the very outset of Jewish settlement, Jewish and Lithuanian historical fates were intertwined. However, despite all research done on that past, there are still a number of chapters in that history which are still far from being sufficiently explored and elucidated, and many a question still awaits its answer. Without going into details, a few aspects of this history only may be recalled here. Over the years down to the early 20th century the Jewish community did not only play an important role in the history of Lithuania, but also saw itself as part of the Lithuanian population. The creation of the “Council of the Land of Lithuania” (*Wa’ad Medinat Lita*) in the early 17th century, i. e. the establishment of an independent system of autonomy separate from the Polish Jews, as well as the emergence of various cultural centres in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in general and its capital in particular, indicate how far a “regional identity” of Lithuanian Jews had developed. Not without reason the latter city was named *Jerusholayim de Lite* (“Lithuanian Jerusalem”) and considered to be the spiritual centre and cultural capital of those Jews who regarded themselves as Litvaks.

At the end of 18th century, Lithuania became part of Tsarist Russia. In the history of Lithuania’s Jews a period began which Zvi Gitelman once called “a century of ambivalence.” On the one hand, as early as from 1794, Jews faced a mixture of outspoken anti-Jewish politics and forced “modernisation” for generations, and many attempts were made to turn them into “useful citizens” of the Russian Empire. The years 1827–1855, i.e. the reign of Nicholas I., were a particularly difficult time for

Lithuania's Jews, alleviated a little bit by the short-lived reforms of Alexander II. After his assassination and the wave of pogroms which erupted immediately after it and terrified hundreds of Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement, the imperial government again started taking more and more restrictive measures against the Jews which were only lifted when the Tsarist Empire eventually collapsed.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, these difficult decades saw at the same time the emergence and growth of a variety of socio-cultural, religious, and/or intellectual movements which gained momentum particularly among the Litvaks from, for example, new rabbinic orthodoxy, specifically Lithuanian Hasidism and Musar-movement to the Haskalah (East European Enlightenment) and, as its offspring, political Zionism and revolutionary socialism, which both drew heavily on the age-old messianic idea in Judaism, to mention but a few.

After World War One, when Lithuania had (re-)gained its independence, there were about 154 000 Jews on its territory, roughly 7,5 % of the entire population and, thus, they constituted the largest minority group in the country. The experiences of Lithuanian-Jewish co-existence in the past centuries helped the Jewish community to identify with Lithuania and take an active part in the struggle for independence and the re-establishment of Lithuanian statehood, and in turn, to become, as it were, a privileged minority at least in the first years of the Lithuanian Republic. To meet the needs of the Jewish community, during the democratic period of the first Lithuanian Republic (1918–1926) a minister of Jewish Affairs was appointed and served on the Lithuanian Cabinet until 1924. Other representatives of the Jewish minority held high-ranking positions in the Lithuanian government, such as Rozenboym and Rahmilevitch, who were deputy ministers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Trade and Commerce respectively.

Similarly, Jews were well established in economic and cultural life and contributed largely to it. Whereas in 1923 more than three quarters of the country's commercial and retail enterprises were owned by Jews, the situation changed dramatically in the late twenties and early thirties, when the number of Lithuanian-owned commercial enterprises grew constantly, while the number owned by Jews fell, reflecting at the same time the deterioration of Lithuanian-Jewish relations during those years.

As has already been mentioned, Jews took an active part in cultural life, too. The then Lithuanian capital Kaunas (Yidd. *Kovne*) hosted two Jewish theatres, and six Jewish daily newspapers were published there.

Jewish schools trained and educated Jewish youth and offered instruction in Hebrew and/or Yiddish. The Jewish community in Lithuania, however, was far from representing a single social group or a single class and one political orientation only. Except for the small number of wealthy Jews, most of them were rather poor, and it was they, who, incidentally, provided the majority of the members of the illegal Communist Party. Despite its place in Lithuanian society, the Jewish community led its own life. First attempts at integration date back to the end of the thirties only, when Jews started backing measures taken by Lithuanians against organisations and/or institutions of the Polish minority. In return, they earned the sympathy and support of certain Lithuanian intellectual circles.

As a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Lithuania was annexed to the USSR in summer 1940, and one year later, in June 1941, occupied by the German army. The most horrible chapter in the long of Lithuania's Jews began. According to research from different perspectives, the German occupation caused the death of about 200 000 Lithuanian Jews, and compared with that figure, only a few survived the Holocaust.

More frightful, however, than the mere fact that these crimes were committed with the active participation of local Lithuanian collaborators, is the interpretation and justification offered for these horrors afterwards. Already in the early forties Lithuanian propaganda and public opinion saw in the Jews allies of the Soviets and accused them of alleged collaboration with the KGB. When, in turn, Lithuanians participated in killing Jews, they were allegedly doing nothing but taking revenge on them.

The afore-mentioned historical dates and developments indicate some of the issues discussed during two conferences which were held in the Lithuanian towns of Nida (September 1997) and Telšiai (September 2001), respectively. A selection of papers presented at these two conferences is published in this book. In addition to that, the book includes a number of studies dealing with pertinent issues like Lithuanian-Jewish relations, the attitude of "the others" towards the Jewish community, the policy of tsarist and Lithuanian governments toward non-dominant ethnic groups, and the Holocaust in the provinces of Western Belarus which once were part of the Litvaks' homeland, too.

One of the most important questions repeatedly raised during the two conferences concerned Litvak identity, i.e. the question of what elements and historical experiences shaped it, and how it changed in the course of (modern) history as a result of the relations between Jews and

Lithuanians. This question is all the more important as researchers who so far dealt with the formation of national identities among minority groups in Lithuania studied it, generally speaking, either in context with the formation of other national identities, neglecting thus “the specificity of the Jewish case,” or completely isolated from them, treating thus Jewish identity as something completely different and apart.

Therefore, the authors of the chapters in this book decided to look at the afore-mentioned issues from two perspectives, from a Jewish and a Lithuanian one respectively, intending thus to reformulate the *status questionis* and begin the discussion on them anew.

The Editors