

This book *Jews on the Map of Lithuania: the Case of Biržai. Preserving Jewish Heritage and Historical Memory* presents new materials about Jewish history, ethnography, sociolinguistic, and epigraphy, collected in the city of Biržai (Lith.: Biržai, Pol.: Birże, Rus.: Биржи/Биржай, and 'בערי' in the Jewish tradition, in Yiddish and Hebrew) and a surrounding region in northern Lithuania during three field works (summer schools) by the *Sefer* Center in 2013 and 2014.

The book does not simply present the results of this large international two-year project of ethnographic, epigraphic, and archival research on the Jewish community of Biržai, where Rabbinical Jews and Karaites lived as neighbors. Besides that, the study constitutes an attempt to preserve Jewish heritage and memory of Jews in what was once the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL).

Several paradigms of historical memory have changed in the area of the former GDL during the modern period. How did these changes affect the material and nonmaterial monuments of Jewish heritage, as well as the perception of Jewish history and culture, and, finally, the memory about the Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors? As the expedition set out for Biržai, we hoped to learn how the Jews were perceived by their neighbors, what recollections the locals had of them and what had already been lost or suppressed from memory, and how different ethnic and religious groups had co-existed in the particularly poly-ethnic and multi-confes-

sional region of Biržai. We were also concerned with the broader (both in the geographic and cultural-historical sense) issue of the impression left by the extinct Jewish civilization on the Lithuania's mental map.

The choice of this location for the field work was largely affected by the fact that Jewish Biržai had been under-researched. The historiography pertaining to its Jewish community (both the Rabbinical and the Karaite) is meager, while the history of the town comprised a conjunction of several points of great scholarly interest.

Biržai once was the center of the Biržai Principality (1547–1811), long-owned by the powerful Lithuanian magnate dynasty of the Radziwiłłs. Under their rule, Biržai flourished and became vital for Lithuania's economic development, receiving the Magdeburg rights and all related privileges in 1589. Normally, as we know, Magdeburg Law did not apply to Jewish inhabitants, since they were not considered a part of the indigenous population of Eastern-European cities. The Radziwiłłs, however, like many other Polish magnates in their possessions, adhered to a rational policy regarding the Jewish population, and included the Jews not only into the Magdeburg Law system, but also, uniquely for the GDL, into the guild system. This tolerant policy, officially proclaimed by the ruling princes, made Jews virtually (albeit with some caveats) equal members of the city's community.

It was particularly important for the research of the field work that Biržai sat on cultural borderlands, as if at an intersection of different intertwining traditions. Lithuania is

* Translated by Olga Lempert.

eighty percent Catholic, however, Biržai is one of its few regions where Protestantism plays a significant role.

The intrigue of coexisting Rabbinical and Karaite communities is another key issue in Biržai's Jewish history. The local Karaite community ceased to exist sometime between the late 17th and the early 18th century, yet the city's topography preserves traces of the peaceful coexistence of two separate Judaic communities to this day.

Biržai's Jewish cemetery is one of the largest extant in Lithuania (over 1,600 stones); however, its grave-stone inscriptions have never been studied before.

The very story of how the location for our field work was chosen and then how this book was prepared and published is a particular yet typical case which manifests growing interest towards the Jewish cultural and historical heritage in the modern society in general and in Biržai in particular. Remarkably, the first steps were taken by local residents. The efforts by Vidmantas Jukonis, a history teacher at Biržai's Aušra high school, led students to get involved in studying their city's Jewish past and helping to clean the Jewish cemetery. The children were soon joined by a group of German Reformed Evangelical activists. The expeditions of the Sefer Center became a welcome continuation to the initiatives of the local authorities and the German enthusiasts.

This collection of articles is a result of scrupulous work both by actual participants of Sefer Center field summer schools, and by our collaborators from research and culture centers in Lithuania and Poland. The book is divided into five sections. The first section of the book is dedicated to the preservation of Jewish heritage throughout the greater Lithuanian-Polish region. In her paper "The Jewish cultural and historical heritage in Lithuania", Rūta Anulytė studies how the attitude of the governmental authorities towards Jewish monuments changed since the post-war period including both the legal aspects and the actual policy of local administrations. She also looked at the preservation, restoration and study of monuments of the material culture (ceme-teries, synagogues, other architectural objects, Jewish books and manuscripts) as well as nonmaterial culture (the Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish and the klezmer culture) in Lithuania. She concludes that the key feature of the changing attitude towards the Jewish heritage in Lithuania is the diminishing gap in the public consciousness between "our" and "their" heritage.

In his article "The state of Jewish cemeteries in Poland", Krzysztof Bielawski elaborates on the subject of saving and preserving Jewish cemeteries using the Polish experience which matches the Lithuanian one in many ways. Both states have lost nearly all of their Jewish populations (as a result not only of the Holocaust, but also of the Jews not returning to their homes following war, emigration, and natural decline). The care of Jewish cemeteries was relayed from the Jewish communities to the state and the local inhabitants. The problem of how the Poles perceive the memory of their ethnically different neighbors becomes once again central.

The second section of the book deals with the history of the Jewish (Rabbinical) and Karaite communities in Lithuania. In his paper "Rabbinical and Karaite communities in medieval Lithuania: problems of original history", Vladimir Petrukhin provides a detailed review of the controversial issue of when Rabbinical and Karaite Jews first arrived to Lithuania, and analyzes a hypothesis of the Lithuanian Jewish origin of the 15th century Novgorod Judaizers movement.

Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė has dedicated her paper to the main issue of the socio-cultural history of the Rabbinical and Karaite Jews in privately-owned Biržai: the dates when both communities emerged in the city, their size, demography, prayer houses of the both communities, the Jewish-Karaite quarter and the locations where most of the Biržai Jewish community lived, main occupations of the Jews, and the unusually tolerant policy of the authorities towards the Jewish population. This historical section of the book includes archival documents (fragments of the 1764 census and Biržai maps of various years).

The third section studies the perception of the Jew in his neighbors' memory (ethnographic and sociolinguistic materials, as well as oral history). This section opens with an article by Ilya Magin, who employs sociolinguistic analysis to recreate the complex image of the Jewish community (the second largest ethnic group in Biržai after the Lithuanians) coexisting in a multilingual and poly-cultural environment, as well as the particular features of the local Yiddish dialect.

Julijana Leganovič's paper "A portrait of a Jewish shtetl in oral stories" reconstructs the outward appearance of Jewish houses, shops, synagogues and other ritual build-

dings, based on the memories of current inhabitants of Biržai and the surrounding area. Rimantas Sliužinskas further explores the subject in his article, presenting an analysis of the collective image of the Jew among Lithuanian respondents: how the Jews interacted with the surrounding population, how their religion was perceived, what were their main occupations were, how they brought up their children, and what the peculiarities of their cuisine were.

“‘Old’ and ‘new’ ethnic neighbors (from stories of pre-war Biržai told by locals and the Lithuanians’ memories of deportation)” is a paper by Natalia Petrova in which she compares the ways how the ethnic neighbors of the Lithuanians are described in the natural (inter-war, 1918–1941, Biržai, a poly-ethnically complex region) and forced (the Gulag and special settlement system during the wartime and post-war years) situations of intercultural borderland.

In the paper “Biržai area locals remember Jewish education” by Rimantas Sliužinskas and Sada Sliužinskienė, the few testimonies of Lithuanians about the pre-war Jewish primary and secondary education are presented and discussed.

Svetlana Amosova’s paper deals with the Blood Libel, an important aspect in the history of inter-ethnic relations between Jews and Lithuanians, which in Biržai and environs tended to take the “legend of the matzot” form rather than that of ritual killings.

Ilya Magin writes in “Old Believers as Jews: particular food prohibitions among northern-Lithuanian Old Believers” of the Old Believers as Biržai’s typologically closest linguistic, religious, and ethnic minority to Jews, and attempts to understand how, on the one hand, this otherness reflected on the Old Believers themselves, and on the other hand, how they perceived the local Jews.

The fourth section of the book is dedicated to the fate of Biržai’s Jews during WWII and the Holocaust. Maria Vyatchina’s article “The Holocaust in the memories of Biržai locals” describes what memories the local inhabitants of Biržai and environs have today of the most dramatic and painful subject in the history of the area’s Jews. Boris Rashkovsky presents the results of searching for the Jews of Biržai who were murdered in the summer of 1941, in the database of the Yad Vashem Memorial Complex. In addition, this section features photographs and translated testimonies of mass executions of Jews,

collected by the former director of the Biržai Local History Museum, Regina Batvinytė-Drevinskienė.

The book concludes with a large section on the epigraphy of gravestone inscriptions including an analytical paper by Mikhail Vasilyev; a table presenting key data from the epitaphs of 1627 gravestones in the Biržai Jewish cemetery; a methodological explication of the chart and the cemetery map; a typological analysis of gravestone shapes; an index of dates, names, and toponyms; and a description of the most interesting gravestones with their photographs.

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