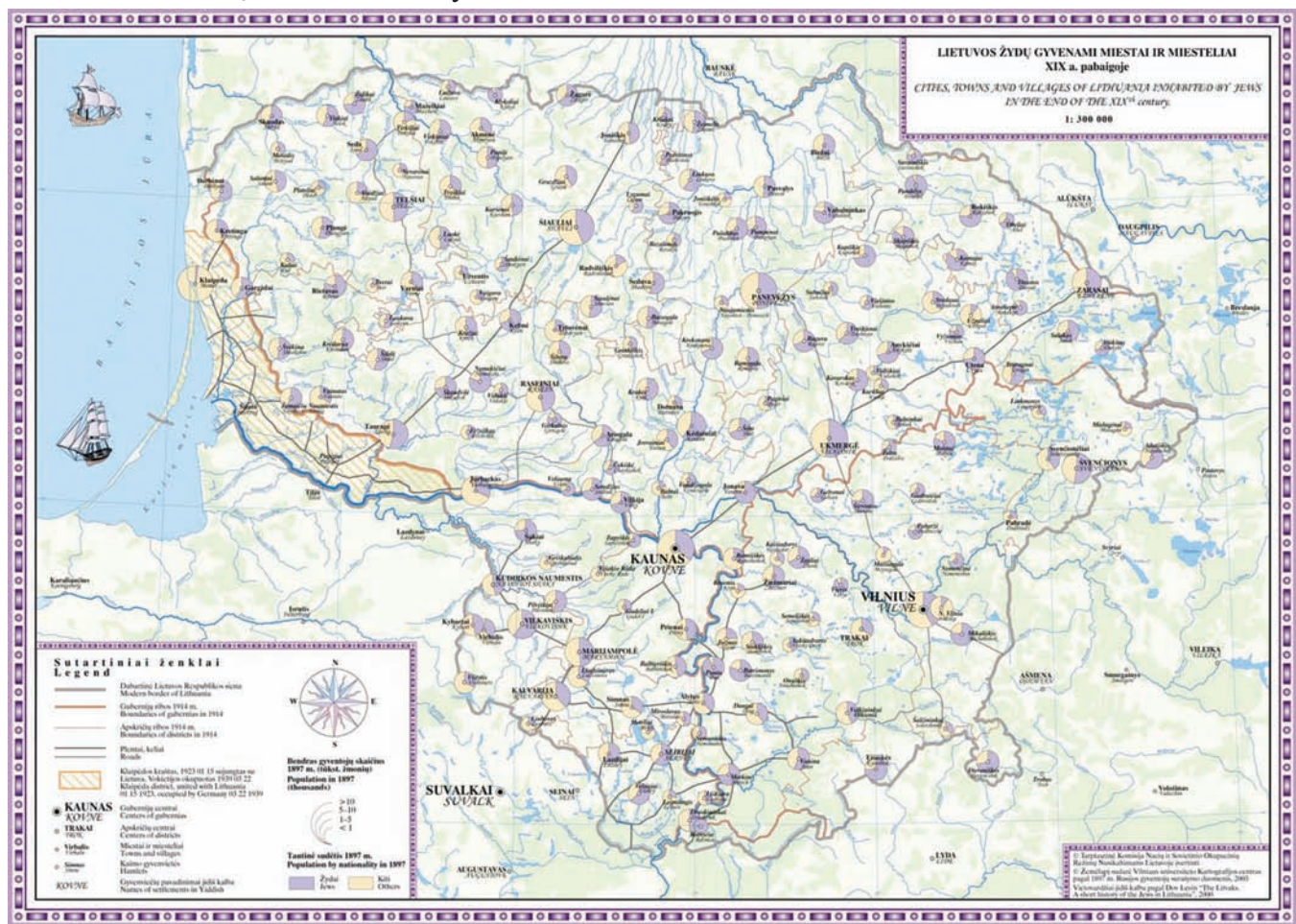


We Were Neighbors: Women of 19th Century Lithuania

By Ellen Cassedy



Map showing the population of small towns in Lithuania before World War II. The purple parts of the circles represent the Jewish population. Courtesy of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Soviet and Nazi Occupation Regimes in Lithuania.

In the days of our foremothers, in the small towns and villages of Lithuania, women of different cultures lived side by side in relative harmony.

The 19th century was the heyday of the Lithuanian small town (miestelis in Lithuanian or shtetl in Yiddish, the Jewish vernacular). In these towns, the lives of Jewish and ethnic Lithuanian women were inextricably intertwined. Although in some ways their cultures were strikingly different, in many respects Jewish and ethnic Lithuanian women had much in common.

Peaceful multicultural coexistence was the order of the day. Pogroms—the violent anti-Jewish rampages common

in other parts of Europe—were rare in Lithuania. Living under Russian czarist rule, with their daily lives controlled by the Polish noblemen who owned much of the land, these women milked cows, churned butter, and made sour milk and cheese. They gardened, cooked and baked bread. They cared for chickens and ducks. They spun wool and flax, knitted, sewed and looked after their children. In both cultures, it was not uncommon for two or three families to live together in one house.

Yet there were significant differences in the daily lives of Jewish and Lithuanian women. The biggest difference was that most Lithuanian women worked in the

fields alongside the men, while most Jews did not work the land.

Julija Beniuševičiūtė-Žymantienė (1845-1921), who took the pen name “Žemaitė,” is considered the greatest of Lithuania’s realist writers. Her short stories illuminate the daily lives of common people in the 19th century, especially women.

“A line of hired hands scythed up the slope,” she wrote in *The Devil Captured*. “A woman followed each man on her knees, rocking to and fro to gather the sheaves. ... Each followed her man, dragging herself along. ... They had left their children at home alone, and now hurried to their day’s work.”

At potato-digging time, working con-



Historic photo of Lithuanian writer Julija Beniuševičiūtė-Žymantienė (Zemaitė)

ditions became even worse. “The earth is so deeply soaked that the diggers cannot crawl on their knees, they must bend, standing. The sacks become soaked, and to carry them one must wade through mud halfway up the leg. ... After sunset the men and women splash homeward, mud covered to the waist.”

Up until just before World War II, a majority of the population in small towns tended to be Jewish. (Overall, Jews constituted 7 percent of the population of prewar Lithuania.) The distinctive traditional Jewish houses—with storefronts facing the street and living quarters in the back—can still be seen in Lithuanian towns across the country.

Jews occupied a position between the most powerful, the landowners, and the least powerful, the agricultural workers. But at the same time, Jews were vulnerable as what anthropologists call an “island culture,” a minority embedded within the ethnic Lithuanian majority.

Under Russian rule, Jews were subject to special restrictions, including a more onerous military draft and restrictions on where they could live. Jews were not allowed to own land. A quota system known as *numerus clausas* (Latin for “closed number”) restricted the number of Jewish professionals.

In rural areas, some Jews—women as

well as men—were granted franchises by the Polish aristocracy to manage a farm, an orchard or an inn.

For example, my great-grandmother, Asne Levin, was the manager of a dairy owned by a Polish landowner in a village not far from Rokiškis (Rokishok in Yiddish). She kept track of the cows and the dairy workers—while raising nine children. She died young, probably of tuberculosis caused by overwork.

Asne’s life was made more difficult by the typical Jewish family structure. The Jewish woman was expected to support the family while the man devoted himself exclusively to reading holy books.

Many Jewish families, however—perhaps most—could not afford to have their men study all day. And so most Jewish men worked as tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths, tanners, hatters, tinsmiths, barbers, haulers or millers. Their wives ran tiny businesses out of their homes or in booths in the market square. On the weekly market days, Lithuanian farmers drove their horse-drawn wagons into town to trade food products for the goods and services provided by Jews.

As for food, both cultures were sustained by a diet suited to the cool northern climate—barley, beets, sorrel, cucumbers, mushrooms, dairy products, and pickled or cured fish. The two cuisines have similar versions of dumplings, doughnuts, and *blynai* or *blintzes*.

Because Jewish women cooked with *schmaltz* (chicken fat) instead of lard, and used more garlic than Lithuanian cooks, it was said that a Jewish home smelled different from a Lithuanian home.

Jewish dietary laws meant that a Jewish woman could not stop into a Lithuanian woman’s house for a cup of tea. A traditional Jewish home was required to have two sets of dishes, one for meat and one for dairy. On Friday night, the beginning of the Sabbath, the table was set with a white tablecloth and embroidered napkins, silver goblets and candlesticks, and the braided egg bread called *challah*.

You could tell Jewish and Lithuanian women apart at a glance by their clothing.

Jews dressed in dark, drab colors. A

married woman cut her hair and covered her head with a kerchief or *sheytl* (wig). On the Sabbath, Jewish women who could afford to wore black silk and jewelry, sometimes a lace scarf. They walked behind their husbands on the way to the synagogue at a slow, dignified pace.

Lithuanian women’s festive clothing included a white kerchief, a white linen blouse with a decorated bodice, a flowered skirt, an apron, and sometimes a shawl or headdress. Each region had its own costumes and textile patterns, and decorative sashes were woven in patterns passed down from ancient times.

Though women of the two cultures prayed to the same god, their religious practices were different. They observed the Sabbath on different days, prayed in different houses of worship, buried their dead in different places, and celebrated a different set of holidays on different days.

At the same time, they shared common folk beliefs in the evil eye, evil spirits, amulets and curses. In an emergency, Lithuanians would sometimes send for a Jewish woman to cast out an evil spell, while Jews would send for a Lithuanian woman.

Jewish and Lithuanian women spoke different languages. Yiddish was the everyday Jewish language, derived from German and written in Hebrew characters. Hebrew and Aramaic were the languages of religious observance, much as Latin was for Catholics. Lithuanians’ main language, of course, was Lithuanian. Russian, Polish and German were also heard. Most people had at least some familiarity with more than one language.

Jews were known as “the people of the book.” Jewish boys began school—called a *cheder*, located in the home of the teacher, called a *melamed*—at the age of 3. Some girls, too, attended school, where they learned to read and write a little Yiddish and some Hebrew. Their lessons were kept short, however, as they were needed at home to do housework and take care of younger children.

“I did not like housework,” wrote a Jewish woman named Bella Lown in *Memoirs of My Life: A personal history of a*



Jewish women in a Lithuanian small town or shtetl.

Lithuanian shtetl. “I preferred to walk out to the meadow, hide in the high grass, and read there the entire day. The town had a fine library stocked with Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew books. I lived and suffered with the heroes and heroines of those books.”

Throughout the 19th century, in contrast, 99 percent of Lithuanian peasants were illiterate, and it was the intent of the Russian regime to keep them that way. Between 1864 and 1904, it was illegal for parents to teach their children to read and write in Lithuanian.

Many Lithuanian mothers defied the ban, however, and in an example of interaction between the cultures, Jewish book peddlers were involved in the underground movement to circulate Lithuanian books.

Needless to say, some Lithuanian women yearned for education.

One Woman’s Life is a memoir of Ona Kartanas, crafted by her granddaughter, Irena Praitis. “I wanted school,” Ona said. “I didn’t mind the walk. I liked the hard benches, the time inside, the neat books, this other world words offered up. Here spun a world all for me. I longed to travel there.”

Ona earned the money she needed for school supplies by climbing trees to remove eggs from the nests of crows and hawks. Farmers paid her by the egg for her help in keeping the birds from stealing their crops.

“I found a way,” she said, “coin by coin, to pay for what I wanted.”

In addition to wanting an education, Lithuanian and Jewish women also dreamed of freedom from hunger, class mobility, an end to Czarist oppression, Zionism, Socialism—and America.

Again, here’s Bella Lown, the Jewish memoirist, at the turn of the 20th century:

“On warm summer evenings, a group of boys and girls would gather and go off to the nearby forest, and the entire area would resound, not only with Russian romantic songs or Yiddish folksongs, but also revolutionary songs, and through these songs we expressed feelings of hope for a better and more beautiful world.”

By this time, the world of the shtetl was on the wane. Most Jews, along with hundreds of thousands of Poles and Lithuanians, moved to the cities or to America. The small towns emptied out, and those people who were left behind became dependent on remittances, money sent back by their relatives.

By the 1930s, inter-ethnic tensions and Nazi sympathies were on the rise. The relatively harmonious multicultural world of the Lithuanian small town came to an end, and an era of extraordinary tumult and tragedy took hold.

In 1940, Russian tanks rolled in, followed by German tanks the next year. During World War II, the Jews of Lithuania were massacred with a swiftness and

thoroughness that was unusual even for that terrible time. Hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian towns have a pit in the forest, not far from the market square, where Jews were assembled, shot and buried in mass graves. The peaceful coexistence of the past was no more.

Nor did the end of World War II bring peace to Lithuania. Between 1940 and 1952, historians say, hundreds of thousands of people in Lithuania—Jews and non-Jews alike—were lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions and emigration—a massive disruption of society, which inflicted deep social scars.

Today, only 4,000 Jews live in Lithuania, 2,000 of them in the capital city of Vilnius. Many small-town Lithuanians have never met a Jew.

How did centuries of relative harmony give way to oppression and mass murder? Scholars and others have struggled to understand.

“Lithuanian and Jewish neighborhoods were close and familiar,” writes Linas Vildžiūnas, a Lithuanian tolerance leader, “but at the same time separated by a wall of different traditions, a lack of understanding, and superstitions.”

A Holocaust educator, Snieguolė Matonienė, agrees: “We lived neighbor to neighbor for centuries,” she said, “but even so, it is hard for Lithuanians to think of Jews as ‘ours.’ Jews were ‘others.’”

In seeking out the truths of the past, today’s historians do not focus solely on the history of generals and kings. They also turn for answers to the daily lives of ordinary women. Examining the texture of woman-to-woman neighborly existence in bygone Lithuania may well teach us valuable lessons—about tolerance, about trauma, and about how we can build a better future.

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