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SEARCH FOR A" "SHTETL IN ŠVĖKŠNA

tells the story of the Jewish community of Švėkšna and its remarkable individuals .through the artistic expression of mosaic

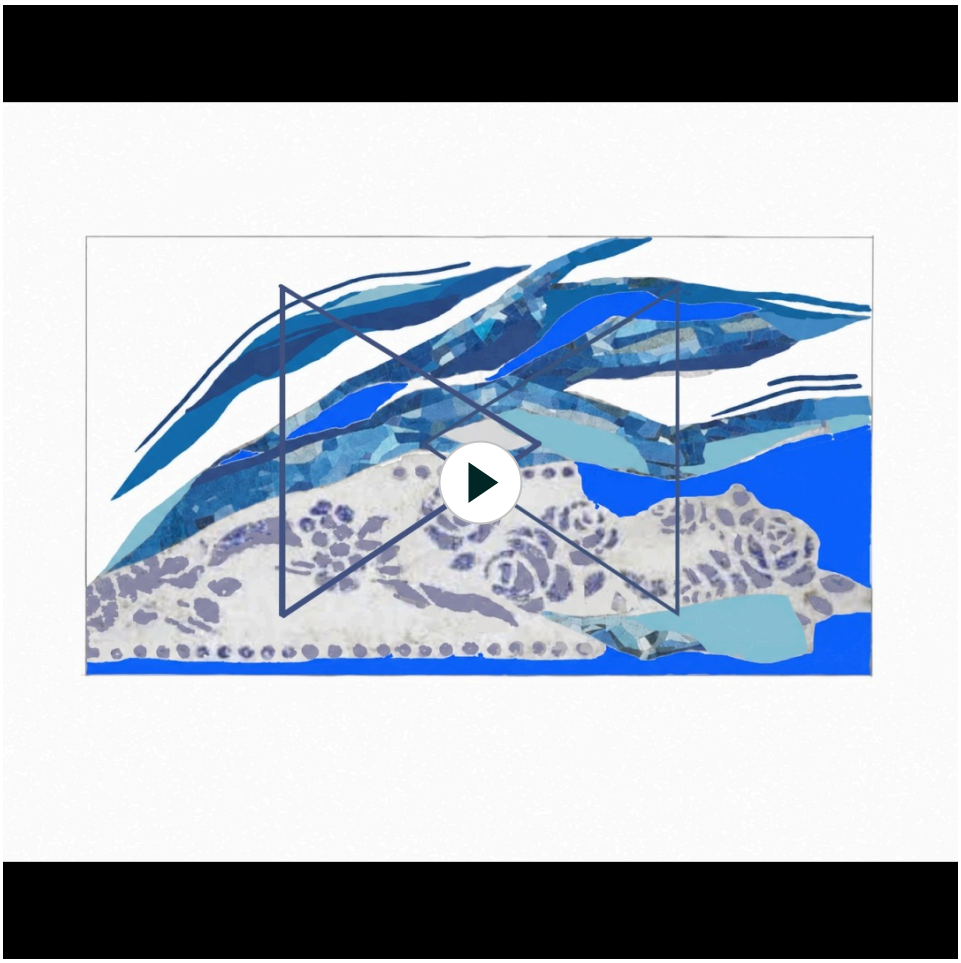
Monika Oželytė-Žąsytienė

21 ביולי 2026



Walking Mosaic Trail through Švėkšna

JEWISH RELIGION AND COMMUNITY LIFE



The mosaic incorporates a floral pattern fragment from the interior of the Švėkšna synagogue

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Lithuanian towns had thriving Jewish communities that formed an integral part of local life. One such example was Švėkšna, where the Jewish community created a distinctive .cultural and religious environment

Esri Community Maps Contrib… Powered by Esri

Mosaic created by Lina .Šlipavičiūtė-Černiauskienė, 2025

In Jewish towns, religion was closely intertwined with everyday life. Synagogues served not only as places of worship but also as the heart of the community. They hosted religious services, festivals, learning, and community meetings. The synagogue played a vital role in preserving the continuity of the community and passing on Jewish religious .traditions to younger generations

Another important institution was the *cheder* – an elementary school for boys, where they studied Hebrew, the Torah, and Jewish religious teachings. Religious education ensured that Jewish traditions and faith were passed on from one generation to the next. In addition, charitable organizations operated in many towns, providing support to poorer members of the community, especially during the Sabbath and .major Jewish holidays

Hebrew school in Švėkšna (LCVA, No 1233 / 1 / 5)

The lives of Švėkšna's Jewish community were deeply shaped by the annual cycle of religious observances. The Sabbath (*Shabbat*) – the weekly day of rest – was an essential part of everyday life, bringing work to a halt and providing an opportunity for families and the community to come together. Festivals such as Passover (*Pesach*), Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur became significant events for the .entire community

Historical Figure

The last rabbi of Švėkšna, **Shalom Isaac Levitan** (1878–1941), was born in Ariogala into a family of scholars and rabbis. He studied at *yeshivas* and, from 1902 onward, served as a rabbi in several Jewish communities in Lithuania and Russia. Between 1908 and 1909, he was the rabbi of Varniai. During .the First World War, he left Lithuania

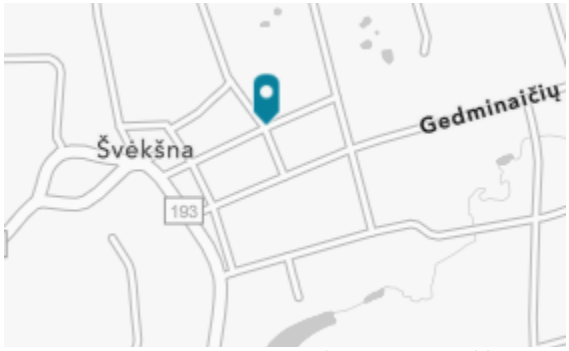
After the First World War, Isaac Levitan became the Chief Rabbi of Oslo, Norway. In 1932, he returned to Lithuania, and from 1934 until the outbreak of the Second World War, he .served as the rabbi of Švėkšna

Isaac Levitan was the author of numerous commentaries on the Talmud and works on Jewish law, including *Divrei Shalom* (Budapest, 1923), *Sukat Shlom Yitzkhak* (Piotrków, 1926), and *Menakhem Shai* (Kėdainiai, 1937), among others. He was murdered .in 1941

Seal of Rabbi Shalom Isaac Levitan of Švėkšna

JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN ŠVĖKŠNA SINCE the 17th Century

After Baroness Catherine Denhoff acquired the Švėkšna estate in 1644, an inventory of the estate was compiled in which Švėkšna was already described as a town. At that time, it was home to 69–79 families, including serfs belonging to the estate, free townspeople, craftsmen, and a Jewish .merchant named **Elijah**



Mosaic created by Lina .Šlipavičiūtė-Černiauskienė, 2025

Fragment of the 1644 inventory of the Švėkšna estate

.mentioning Elijah, the first known Jew to have lived in Švėkšna

In the second half of the 17th century, following the wars between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Sweden, Jewish settlers began moving into the depopulated towns of Samogitia. Why did these newcomers choose Švėkšna? At that time, it was a prosperous and economically strong town, located in a strategic position near the Prussian border and important trade routes, making it an attractive place for .settlement and commerce

The migration of Jewish settlers to Samogitia was encouraged by a privilege granted to the Jews of Samogitia in 1669 by Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki, ruler of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. This privilege gave Jews the right to trade freely, practise crafts, observe their religion, build synagogues, .and maintain their own cemeteries

By 1695, Švėkšna had 89 households, 15 of which belonged to Jewish families. The records mention merchants, a physician, and a customs officer. Among the surnames recorded are Chaumowicz, Fawisz, Hryszko, Joachim, Jozephowicz, .Lazarowicz, Meier, Pluszelewicz, and Wulfowicz

The Jews of Švėkšna traded with Liepāja and towns in Prussia. By the end of the 17th century, a Jewish house of prayer may .already have stood near the town's market square

According to the 1765 census, Švėkšna was home to 26 Jewish families, comprising 219 people. The town's almshouse also .accommodated 26 families, with a total of 130 residents

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the Švėkšna *kahal* (Jewish community) had 420 members in 1766. That same

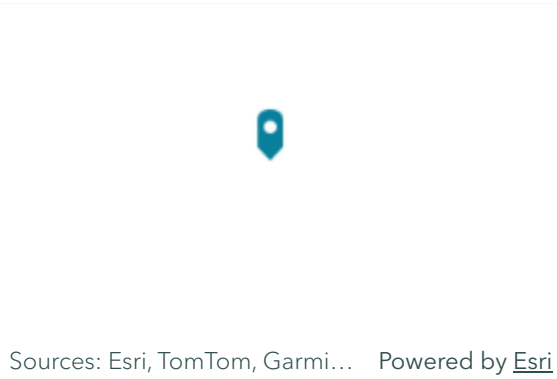
year, Jan Wilhelm Broel-Plater (1715–1769) purchased the Švėkšna estate, and a new estate inventory was compiled. Among the town's buildings, it records an '*iškala*' – a Jewish .house of prayer – located near the market square

In 1826, 350 of Švėkšna's 766 recorded residents were Jewish. The census also mentions three communal Jewish buildings, believed to have been a synagogue, an almshouse, and a bathhouse. During the second half of the 19th century, the Jewish community of Švėkšna prospered. Many Jewish residents were relatively well off; some leased mills or farms, Jewish bakeries operated in the town, and a long commercial building known as the '*kromai*' (market stalls) stood in the .town centre, serving as a hub of lively trade

In 1897, Švėkšna had a population of 1,819, of whom 974 were Jewish – more than 53% of the town's inhabitants. By 1923, the town's population had fallen to 1,340, including 519 Jews (39%). In 1940, Jews made up only about one quarter of Švėkšna's approximately 2,000 residents. This steady decline .in the Jewish population was largely the result of emigration

JEWISH YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Until the First World War, Švėkšna had a two-grade Russian public school, established in 1864 in the town's almshouse. The school was attended mainly by Lithuanian boys, as well as Russian and German children, and Jewish girls. Jewish boys did not attend, as they received their education from the rabbi at the .synagogue



Mosaic created by Lauryna

.Kiškytė-Usonė, 2025

During the interwar period, Švėkšna had a separate Jewish primary school under the authority of the Ministry of Education. The school operated in two buildings: one on

Jewish Street (now J. Maciejausko St. 8) and the other at what .was then Mikužio St. 8 (now Dariaus and Girėno St. 8)

In 1930, the Jewish school was incorporated into the Lithuanian primary school as one of its classes and continued to operate until 1941. It was attended by approximately 40–50 Jewish children. In accordance with the Ministry of Education curriculum, lessons were taught in Lithuanian, while Hebrew .was also part of the programme

The school observed the Jewish Sabbath: there were no classes on Saturdays, and lessons were held on Sundays instead. Religious instruction was provided by Jankelis Fridelis Chaimas Klipas. Cipė Frišmanaitė taught at the school from 1929 to 1933, Seiferytė from 1933 to approximately 1937, and .Boruchovičienė from approximately 1937 to 1940

During the interwar period, Jewish youth in Švėkšna grew up at the crossroads of two worlds: Jewish religious tradition and the modern Lithuanian education system. At the age of thirteen, boys completed their studies in the *cheder* and faced an important decision – whether to learn a trade or profession, or, if academically inclined, to continue their religious education in the *beit midrash* and later in a *yeshiva*. Education in both the *beit midrash* and the *yeshiva* was provided free of charge. A *yeshiva* – an institution of higher Jewish religious learning, comparable to a rabbinical seminary – also operated clandestinely in Švėkšna during the .interwar period

For Jewish families, preserving traditional values and religious upbringing was of great importance. At the same time, many parents wanted their children to receive a secular education at the local gymnasium. Jewish pupils took an active part in the town's cultural life, playing football and table tennis and joining various youth organisations. Parents often found themselves balancing the expectations of religious authorities, who hoped their sons would become rabbis, with their children's own aspirations to live lives similar to those of .their Lithuanian peers

Historical Figures

Chackelis Segalas (1924–2016) lived in the centre of Švėkšna (20b Liepų Square). His father, Michaelis, was a butcher who owned premises in the *kromai* (market stalls), where he sold meat. His mother, Eta, looked after the household. According to Chackelis, his mother was strict: if she did not allow the children to go somewhere, they had to obey. Parents were held in the highest respect. The family had five children: a daughter, Brochė, and four sons – Izakas, Mošė, Abraomas, and Abe. They were a deeply religious family. Every morning, the boys went to the synagogue to pray. After returning home for breakfast, they went on to school.

.Chackel Segal, Canada

After school, Chackelis played football, but he had to be home by 6 p.m. Whenever he wanted to go anywhere, he first had to ask his parents for permission. He attended the *cheder*, then the Jewish primary school, and later the gymnasium. His favourite teacher was Cipė Frišmanaitė. According to Chackelis, she was kind but strict, and would sometimes make pupils stand in the corner as punishment. At school, he studied both Hebrew and Lithuanian. He was also very close friends with Naftalis Zivas.

Chackelis survived the Holocaust. After the Second World War, he went to Palestine, served in the Israeli army, and later settled in Canada, where he raised a family, established a successful business, and remained open to people and cultures from around the world.

Naftalis Zivas (1924–2025) also lived in the centre of Švėkšna, just a short distance from Chackelis, at 23 Liepų Square.

The Ziv family had five children: Max (Motelis), Libė, Miriam, Minda (Mindalė), and **Naftal**. Their father, Mošė, was a merchant who sold fabrics, women's underwear, and men's trousers. The family home had a small orchard and a vegetable garden. Naftal fondly recalled that one of his favourite childhood treats was his mother Rachel's freshly baked bread, eaten with a cucumber picked straight from the garden. On Friday evenings and Sabbath mornings, the whole family attended services at the synagogue. His father went every day, and if he was unable to attend, he prayed at home instead. According to Naftal, the family observed Jewish traditions while maintaining a largely secular way of life.

Naftal in the courtyard of his family home in Švėkšna.

From the age of six, Naftal attended the *cheder*. Later, his father decided that his son should pursue a secular education, although both the rabbi and his teacher hoped that Naftal would continue his studies at a *yeshiva*. Instead of sending him to the nearest *yeshiva* in Telšiai, his father enrolled him in the Švėkšna 'Saulė' Gymnasium, where he studied alongside his older sisters.

Naftal enjoyed attending the Gymnasium and taking part in the same activities as his classmates. He was particularly fond of sports. In 1939, the newspaper *Vakarai* reported on the Švėkšna table tennis championships, where the top three places were won by Gymnasium students Stonys, Bichnevičius, and Zivas. Table tennis remained one of Naftal's lifelong passions.

Naftal survived the Holocaust. In 1950, he emigrated to Australia, where he raised a family and established a small business.

EMIGRATION IN THE 19TH–20TH CENTURIES *(in preparation)*

From the mid-19th century onwards, increasing numbers of Lithuanians and Jews emigrated to the United States, South Africa, Palestine, Argentina, and Canada. Between 1881 and 1897, more than 50,000 people left Kaunas Governorate, which at the time included Švėkšna. The reasons for emigration varied, but the migration intensified significantly after 1881, when the assassination of Tsar Alexander II was followed by anti-Jewish pogroms and .growing persecution throughout the Russian Empire

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Mosaic created by Lina

.Šlipavičiūtė-Černiauskienė, 2025

One of the main reasons for emigration was the introduction of compulsory military service, as many young men left to avoid serving in the Tsarist army. Economic hardship was another important factor. Low wages encouraged many working-age men to emigrate first, later bringing over their families, relatives, and acquaintances. Compared with Lithuanian emigrants, Jewish emigrants were more likely to leave as entire families, reflecting their strong family ties and commitment to preserving religious and cultural traditions. Ideological motives also played a significant role. Many Jews aspired to return to the Promised Land, and emigration to Palestine was often carefully planned and .prepared over many years

Historical Figure

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Jews from Lithuania emigrated to the United States to escape economic hardship and the pressures of Tsarist rule. **Morisas Bernardas Zaksas** /Morris Bernard Sachs/ (1896–1971) was born in Švėkšna into the family of a teacher. After losing his

father at an early age, he emigrated to Chicago at the age of twelve to join his .older brother

Around 1908, Morris Bernard Sachs arrived at Ellis Island together with thousands of other immigrants. However, no one came to meet him. Alone in a foreign country, the young boy was temporarily taken in by a local butcher. Sachs remembered this stranger's act of kindness for the rest of .his life

.Morris B. Sachs, United States

When he arrived in the United States, Morris Bernard Sachs spoke only Yiddish and knew no English. He began by selling neckties door to door. Through determination, hard work, and perseverance, he built a successful chain of clothing stores and became one of .Chicago's best-known merchants

Around 1930, Morris B. Sachs began promoting a radio programme in the display window of his store. In 1934, he launched his own show, ***The Morris B. Sachs Amateur Hour***. The programme was later adapted for television. It featured local amateur performers – including musicians, singers, acrobats, and comedians – many of whom gained widespread recognition after appearing on the show. Among those whose careers were launched in this way were Mel Tormé, Bob .Fosse, Frankie Laine, Steve Allen, and many others

Morris B. Sachs was widely known for his philanthropy. He donated generously to Lithuanian and Jewish communities, supported concert halls and charitable institutions, and assisted war veterans. He was also active in public life and politics, and in 1955 was elected Treasurer of the City of Chicago. He died in 1957, leaving behind his wife, Anna, their daughters, Zenia and Rhoda, and their son, Morris. His remarkable life had taken him from a small town in Samogitia

(Lithuania) to becoming one of Chicago's best-known civic and .business figures

TALENTS FROM SMALL TOWNS

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Lithuania's small towns were multicultural communities in which Jewish residents were renowned for their enterprise, creativity, and talents across many fields. Švėkšna was one such town, where Jews not only played an important role in trade and crafts but also made significant contributions to culture, education, and community .life

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Mosaic created by Lauryna .Kiškytė-Usonė, 2025

Education played a central role in Jewish family life. Even in a small town, children were encouraged to study – first in religious schools, while also receiving a secular education. This environment nurtured a wide range of talents, from merchants and physicians to musicians and community leaders. In a small town, such individuals played an especially important role. They helped shape the cultural landscape, provided essential services, and preserved the traditions of .the community

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, emigration had become an increasingly significant phenomenon. Economic opportunities in Lithuania were limited, prompting many Jews from Švėkšna to leave for the United States, South Africa, Palestine orį other countries in search of a better .future

Historical Figure

One such person was **Šlioma Šteinbergas** (1890–1938), who later adopted the name **Samuel (Sam) Steinberg** in the

United States. Born in Švėkšna, he became an actor, playwright, and .composer

Steinberg emigrated to the United States with his family in 1903 and settled in Philadelphia. In 1905, he joined the *Garden Dramatic Club* and soon began his career as an actor. Over the years, he wrote dozens of plays and .songs for the Yiddish theatre

Samuel Steinberg became a well-known figure in New York's Yiddish theatre. In 1913, he married Nellie Casman, who had emigrated from Ukraine, and together they created plays and songs that gained popularity far beyond the Jewish community. One of their greatest successes was the song *Yossel, Yossel*, composed in 1923: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXQssPj2GQk

Samuel Steinberg

In 1929, Steinberg and his wife, the actress Nellie Casman, travelled to Argentina, where their play *The Agreement* was successfully staged at the Teatro Argentino in Buenos Aires. In July of the same year, his play *The Wife*, with music by Yedilah Belzer, premiered. From Argentina, the couple continued their tour through Western Europe, where they achieved further .success with their theatrical productions

In 1932, Steinberg and his wife, Nellie Casman, embarked on another theatrical tour of Western and Eastern Europe. His plays were successfully performed in England, Romania, and .Poland

Steinberg was a distinguished character actor who had the opportunity to perform alongside some of the greatest stars of the Yiddish stage, including *David Kessler, Leon Blank, Jacob P. Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, Keni Liptzin, Sara Adler, Clara*

Young, and, for many years, with *Max Gebel's* theatrical .company

During one visit to Argentina, Steinberg was asked, “What :”?caused you to become a play-writer

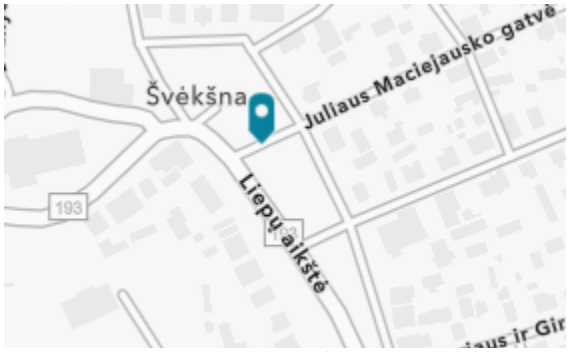
I cannot say, but I always wanted to do something positive for" the world. If it is possible to say, because I was a play-writer, with the technical knowledge, I felt the theatre should bring all ."the wonderful things in the world to people

On 1 July 1938, Samuel Steinberg died in New York, leaving .behind a lasting legacy in the world of Yiddish theatre

In 1938, the song reached international audiences in its English version, *Joseph, Joseph*, and was subsequently recorded and performed by numerous artists: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqawqSF4xs8&list=RDWqawqSF4xs8&start_radio=1

TRADE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

After the **Great Fire of 1925**, the residents of Švėkšna gradually rebuilt their homes and commercial buildings. Between 1930 and 1933, the town square was paved with cobblestones, lined with linden trees, and supplied with electricity. Every Thursday, a bustling market was held – as it still is today – bringing the town to life with merchants and shoppers from across .the region



Mosaic created by Lina .Šlipavičiūtė-Černiauskienė, 2025

Following the incorporation of the Klaipėda Region into Lithuania in 1923, increasing numbers of traders came to Švėkšna, which had become a thriving town during the interwar period. A single market day each week was no longer

sufficient to meet the needs of local residents and people from the surrounding countryside, and many called for a second .weekly market

.Market stalls in Švėkšna, early 20th century

Shops, small retail businesses, bakeries, and butcher's shops were largely owned by Jewish merchants, with most concentrated around the market square in the town's rows of trading stalls. Jewish shopkeepers are regarded as pioneers in the use of commercial signage. Shop signs were typically painted directly onto the exterior walls of buildings – above doorways, windows, or on corner façades – to ensure they were clearly visible. By 1931, Švėkšna officially had 37 businesses and commercial establishments. Twelve of these, including shops and :workshops, were owned and operated by Jewish residents

Leiba Gluchas traded in hides, while Chanė Icikovič, Mošė Joselovičius, and Goldė Judelovičienė dealt in textiles and manufactured goods. Izraelis Levitanas traded in timber and was engaged in fuel production, and Rebeka Ošerovičienė sold iron and ironware. Mejeris Presas and Abelis Zalmanovičius operated leather workshops. Abraomas Šmuilovičius and Leiba Šmuilovičius were meat merchants, while Hilelis Javneris owned a watermill in the village of Pagraumenė. Of the town's four tea houses, one belonged to G. Strukaitė, a Jewish businesswoman. Švėkšna was also home to the Count's brickyard, a dairy processing company, the *Singer Sewing Machine Company* store selling sewing machines, bicycles, and musical instruments, as well as a slaughterhouse, a bakery, .three wool carding mills, a pharmacy, and several sawmills

In 1938, the Švėkšna Branch of the Lithuanian Businessmen's Association was established. Its executive board consisted of L. Šertvytis, Pr. Kuzas, P. Paulauskas, St. Klumbys, and Pr. Didjurgis. The organisation sought to attract as many Lithuanian entrepreneurs and craftsmen as possible to its activities. As the number of traders continued to grow,

Lithuanian merchants also began renting commercial premises in the market stalls that had previously been occupied by Jewish businesses. In an effort to strengthen the national economy and encourage local commerce, goods were supplied to Švėkšna through *Lietūkis* and other wholesale .distributors based in Klaipėda

Smuggling also had its own market, with contraband goods attracting buyers for a variety of reasons. Most of these goods arrived from East Prussia, smaller quantities came from .Latvia, and only a limited amount from Poland

Food was among the most common categories of smuggled goods, ranging from yeast to red onions. The variety depended on the season, price differences across the border, and even changing fashions. Some products, such as chocolate, were subject to high import duties in an effort to keep money .within the country's economy

During the interwar period, **smuggled goods** were purchased not only because they were cheaper, but also because they were considered to be of better quality. People bought contraband yeast because German yeast was both less expensive and superior to its Lithuanian equivalent. Among the most popular smuggled goods were spirits, ***anodija*** (an intoxicating mixture of ether and alcohol), matches, cigarette .lighters, and cigarettes

Historical Figure

Rebeka Ošerovičienė (c. 1901–1941) was born in Skuodas to Joel and Feiga Neuman. Before marrying the flax merchant Šaja Ošerovičius, she taught .mathematics at the University of Riga

After her marriage, Rebeka moved to Švėkšna, where she and her husband raised three children: daughters Rachel and Dvora, and a son, Samuel.

Rebeka Ošerovičienė is standing on the right. Photograph

.from the V. Bliūdžius Archive

While caring for her family, she also ran a business and owned a shop in the town. Interwar records indicate that, at various times, Rebeka .Ošerovičienė was engaged in the trade of iron and ironware

Jewish women played a significant role in small-scale commerce, with many engaged in market trading, particularly in small towns. They sold textiles, clothing, haberdashery, foodstuffs, and a variety of household goods. Their work not only supplemented family income but, in many cases, became the family's primary source of support while their husbands .devoted themselves to religious study

In 1940, the Ošerovičius family home at Liepų Square 3 was nationalised by the Soviet authorities and became the local headquarters of the Communist Party, while only a small part of the building was left for the family to live in. Rebeka's .ironware shop was also nationalised

.Sam Sherron, United States

After the Nazi occupation of Švėkšna in 1941, Rebeka's husband, Šaja, and their son, Samuel, were taken with the other Jewish men to perform forced labour on farms near Šilutė. In 1943, they were deported to Auschwitz and later transferred to Dachau. Rebeka and her daughters remained in Švėkšna and, together with the town's remaining Jewish residents, were executed in the forest near the village of Inkakliai on 20 September 1941. Šaja and Samuel survived .the Holocaust and, after the war, settled in the United States

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