

# The Lithuanian Jewish Community of Telšiai

By Philip S. Shapiro<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This work had its genesis in an initiative of the “Alka” Samogitian Museum, which has undertaken projects to recover for Lithuanians the true history of the Jews who lived side-by-side with their ancestors. Several years ago, the Museum received a copy of the 500-plus-page “yizkor” (memorial) book for the Jewish community of Telšiai,<sup>2</sup> which was printed in 1984.<sup>3</sup> The yizkor book is a collection of facts and personal memories of those who had lived in Telšiai before or at the beginning of the Second World War. Most of the articles are written in Hebrew or Yiddish, but the Museum was determined to unlock the information that the book contained. Without any external prompting, the Museum embarked upon an ambitious project to create a Lithuanian version of *The Telshe Book*. As part of that project, the Museum organized this conference to discuss *The Telshe Book* and the Jewish community of Telšiai.

This project is of great importance to Lithuania. Since Jews constituted about half of the population of most towns in provincial Lithuania in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a Lithuanian translation of the book will not only give Lithuanian readers a view of Jewish life in Telšiai but also a better knowledge of the town’s history, which is our common heritage.

The first part of this article discusses my grandfather, Dov Ber Shapiro, who was born in 1883 in Kamajai, in the Rokiškis region, and attended the Telshe Yeshiva before emigrating in 1903 to the United States, where he was known as “Benjamin” Shapiro. The second part discusses the history of Telšiai’s Jewish community in the context of the history of Jews in Lithuania. The third part reviews the history and legacy of the Telshe Yeshiva, which was founded upon the principles and philosophy of the Vilna Ga’on and which developed a model system of lifelong learning that is followed throughout the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is an attorney who received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History (with Honors) from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Maryland School of Law. He also attended the Baltimore Hebrew College. In the late czarist era Mr. Shapiro’s ancestors emigrated from Lithuania to Baltimore. In 1901 his paternal ancestors co-founded the B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society (“BAYL”) as a mutual assistance group to help other relatives emigrate, [www.bayl.org](http://www.bayl.org). Mr. Shapiro serves as the society’s co-president and historian. Through the non-profit organization Remembering Litvaks, Inc., [www.litvaks.org](http://www.litvaks.org), Mr. Shapiro and his wife Aldona undertake various projects to remember the Litvak communities in places that today are in Lithuania and Belarus. The author is solely responsible for the opinions expressed herein. © 2020 Philip S. Shapiro

<sup>2</sup> The town known in modern, standard Lithuanian as Telšiai, which is pronounced tel-SHAY, is known by different names. In the local Samogitian dialect of Lithuanian, the name is pronounced TEL-sheh, as is the name of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio. In Yiddish, the town is known as Telzh, in Polish as Telsze, in Russian as Telshi, and in Hebrew as Telz, JewishGen locality page for Telšiai, Lithuania, <https://www.jewishgen.org/communities/community.php?usbgn=-2619849> (accessed May 21, 2020). For the purpose of this article, the modern Lithuanian name refers to the town; Telshe is used in referring to the yeshiva and yizkor (memorial) book; and no change was made to versions that appear in quotations and citations.

<sup>3</sup> *Sefer Telz (Lita): Matsevet Zikaron Li-Kehilah Kedoshah (The Book of Telshe (Lithuania): A Memorial to the Jewish Community of Telšiai)*, by Yitzhak Alperowitz (Irgun Yots’e Telz be-Yisra’el (the Organization of Those In Israel Who Emigrated From Telšiai) Tel-Aviv, 1984), (*The “Telshe Book”*), <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books/yzk-nybc314047/alperowitz-yitzhak-sefer-telz-lita-matsevet-zikaron-li-kehilah-kedoshah>, and <https://ia601904.us.archive.org/19/items/nybc314047/nybc314047.pdf>.

## I. My Grandfather, Dov Ber / Benjamin Shapiro

### Baltimore's Litvak Heritage

I am a native of Baltimore, Maryland, as was my father Dr. Solomon Shapiro. My grandfather, Dov Ber Shapiro (1883-1940), from Kamai / Kamajai, attended the Telshe Yeshiva approximately in the period 1895-1900. In 1903, he emigrated to Baltimore, where he adopted the name of Benjamin Shapiro.

About 100,000 Jews live in Baltimore and two-thirds are descendants of Jews from the Kovna Gubernya, a province of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Empire that consisted of most of the land of the modern Republic of Lithuania.<sup>4</sup> All of these descendants know that their ancestors came from "Lithuania." Even the Yiddish that was spoken in Baltimore was in the "Litvish" dialect. Baltimore also has two major Jewish educational institutions, the Talmudical Academy, for secondary education, and the Ner Israel Rabbinical College, both of which are based upon the "Lithuanian" model of study that was refined in Telšiai.

My grandfather died before I was born, but I heard much about him from my parents and relatives. Also, in growing up in Baltimore's Lithuanian-Jewish community, I could see many parallels between his life and those of the other Jews from the Kovna Gubernya who emigrated in the period 1881-1915.

These Jews were Orthodox, which meant that they strictly observed the 613 commandments in the Five Books of Moses and the rabbinical decisions interpreting those laws over the course of 2,500 years. Education on both religious and secular subjects was of the highest importance, as well as a desire to continually to work toward self-improvement. It was only later that I learned that these characteristics of Baltimore Jews came from the Litvak culture of Lithuania, which helped me better understand what I had been told about my grandfather.



Dov Ber Shapiro, known in the United States as Benjamin Shapiro (1883-1940).

---

<sup>4</sup> Among the family surnames heard in Baltimore are based upon the Yiddish names for places in the Kovna Gubernya, such as Ezrine (Ezherenai /Zarasai), Kadin (Kėdainiai), Kelemer (Kelmė), Legum (Lygumai), Palanker (Palanga), Pumpian (Pumpėniai), Rosin (Raseiniai), Samet (Zamogitija / Žemeitija), and Zager (Žagare).

## **A. The 18 Kilometers Separating Kamajai and Rokiškis**

My grandfather Dov Ber was 20 years old when he arrived in Baltimore in 1903. He adopted the “American” name of “Benjamin Shapiro” but family members often referred to him as “Dov Ber.” In Baltimore, he met for the first time his cousin, Zlata Zavilevitz, who had grown up in Rokiškis, just 18 kilometers north of his native town of Kamajai. She emigrated to Baltimore in 1901, and adopted the American-sounding name of “Celia Smith.” Ironically, the two cousins had never met in Lithuania. This is because Jews worked six days a week, from Sunday to Friday, and their only “free time” was on the afternoon of Shabbos – the Sabbath. Jewish law makes clear that Shabbos is a day of rest not only for people but also for their animals.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, if one wanted to go to Rokiškis on the Sabbath, he would have to walk, and the 36-kilometer distance from Kamajai to Rokiškis and back was too far to travel by foot in one day.

## **B. Why Did Dov Ber / Benjamin Attend the Telshe Yeshiva?**

My grandfather was sent to the Telshe Yeshiva, which was 237 kilometers west of Kamajai. Two well-regarded yeshivas were closer: The Ponevitzh Yeshiva, in Panevėžys, was only 86 kilometers from Kamajai; and the Slabodka Yeshiva in the Viliampolė neighborhood of Kovna / Kaunas, was 164 kilometers from Kamajai. Moreover, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, one could travel by train from the nearest railroad station, at Panemunėlis geležinkelio stotis, directly to both Ponevitzh and Kovna. To travel at that time from Kamajai to Telšiai, the final part of the trip would have to be made by horse-drawn coach or cart. So why was Dov Ber sent to the Telshe Yeshiva?

A partial answer is found in Levi Shalit’s article in the yizkor book for Rokiškis. Although most Lithuanian Jews were followers of the Vilna Ga’on, who was an opponent (“misnagid”) of the Chasidic Movement, the Chasidim had made substantial in-roads in northeastern Lithuania. Shalit wrote that children of Chasidic families were sent to the Telshe Yeshiva because, unlike other Lithuanian yeshivas, students were never questioned about their personal beliefs. The Telshe Yeshiva was singularly focused on the study of Jewish law and mussar<sup>6</sup> – and nothing else.<sup>7</sup>

Since Dov Ber and his family were not Chasidic, it is assumed that the Shapiro family became familiar with Chasidic liturgy in “davening” (praying) with their neighbors in Kamajai. Years later, Dov Ber prayed in Baltimore’s Tzamech Tzedek synagogue, which was Chasidic, and my father, Dr. Solomon Shapiro, received his bar mitzvah there. I can only assume that that Dov Ber was sent to the Telshe Yeshiva because many of his childhood friends in Kamajai, who were Chasidic, were sent there.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Bible instructs that the Sabbath is a day of rest for the entire household, including one’s children and animals, those who work for the householder, and even visiting guests. Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:14

<sup>6</sup> Mussar (מוסר) is a Hebrew word from the Book of Proverbs, 1:2, and refers to a body of literature that describes moral conduct and discipline in all aspects of life. In the first Mussar book, *Duties of the Heart*, which was written in Eleventh Century Spain, Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda explained that it was just as important to fulfill the spirit of a commandment as to fulfill it literally.

<sup>7</sup> “The Peculiarity of Rakishok in Jewish Lithuania,” by Levi Shalit, Translated by Bella Golubchik, *Memorial Book of Rokiskis* [Translated from the yizkor book for Rokiškis and its Environs], p. 43, <https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/rokiskis/rok043.html>.



1888 Map of the Kovna Guberniya, showing railway lines at the time.

### C. A “Blatt Gemora” (A “Page of the Talmud”)

“Benjamin” and “Celia” married around 1907. They lived in a part of Baltimore that was crowded with immigrants from Lithuania – both Jewish and Catholic. The couple had several children and lived in a typical “store-front” row house. The front of the first floor was a store that faced the street. In back of the first floor was a small parlor and kitchen. The family’s bedrooms were upstairs.

When the store was not busy, my grandfather enjoyed studying the commentaries on Jewish law known as the “Gemora.” The Yiddish word “blatt” means “page.” As I grew up, I came to learn that it was a longstanding Litvak tradition to use one’s free time to gain spiritual growth from analyzing the words and philosophy found in a “blatt Gemora.” This characteristic was displayed by the Vilna Ga’on, who spent most of his life studying and rejected a pleasure-seeking life. He taught that the joy and spiritual excitement of study and of worship were a sufficient reward.<sup>8</sup>

The Ga’on also insisted that Jews learn about the natural sciences and the world around them. “If a man is deficient in the sciences, he will be deficient a hundredfold in knowledge of Torah, for Torah and science go together.”<sup>9</sup> Among other things, the Ga’on had Euclid’s *Elements* translated into Hebrew.

My grandfather, too, took an interest in the world. He quickly learned the language of his adoptive country and was said to have written English “with a fine hand.” It should be recalled that

<sup>8</sup> *The Jews of Lithuania: A History of A Remarkable Community 1316-1945*, by Masha Greenbaum, Gefen Publishing House (Jerusalem and New York, 1995) (“Greenbaum”), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

from 1864 until 1904 the czars forbade the use of the Latin alphabet in Lithuania. At an early age Dov Ber would have learned to read and write Hebrew and Yiddish using Hebrew letters and probably knew how to read Russian written in Cyrillic letters before leaving Lithuania. However, he probably never saw his name written in Latin letters until he came to Bremen in 1903 to take the steamship *Hannover* to Baltimore.



The Steamship *Hannover* (2) of the Norddeutsch-Lloyd Line was built in 1899.

#### **D. The “Farein” – The Family Society**

My grandmother, Celia Smith Shapiro, had a brother who was known in Lithuania as Zanvil Zavilevitz. He had come to Baltimore around 1898 and changed his name to the more American-sounding “Myer Smith.” Myer recognized that many family members needed financial assistance to travel to America and begin to support themselves. He organized a “farein” – society – of relatives who would pool their resources to create a revolving fund that would be used to buy ship tickets and help family members open small shops. In 1901, the “farein” was formally organized as the “B’nai Abraham and Yehuda Laib Family Society,” [www.bayl.org](http://www.bayl.org). Although not stated as such, the Society was modeled after the Litvak custom of organizing many types of special-purpose groups for specific charitable purposes, such as feeding the poor, visiting the sick, preparing the dead for proper burial, and arranging for the care of orphans.

This tradition of mutual assistance has two roots. The first are the “degrees” of charity developed by rabbinic scholars over the course of two millennia. The obligations of charity were summarized and ordered by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century rabbi, physician, and philosopher Moses ben Maimon, who was known as Maimonides (1138-1204). The highest degree of charity is to find work for someone so that he will not be in the embarrassing situation of having to ask for charity.

The second root is the “kahal”<sup>10</sup> system of self-government that developed in Lithuania and Poland in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Each kahal was administered by local officials who were democratically elected and taxed its members to raise funds for the common good. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the czarist regimes reduced the authority of the kahals, but the tradition of individuals jointly supporting projects for the community’s general welfare continued.

Dov Ber / Benjamin Shapiro arrived in Baltimore in 1903 and quickly became involved in the Society’s work to help family members who wanted to leave Lithuania. Before the First World War, most had come to the United States. Between 1920 and 1930, most went to South Africa.

---

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew word “kahal” (קהל) means “community” and is based upon the biblical Hebrew verb meaning to “assemble” or “gather.”

Even after there were no more Jews left in Lithuania, the Society continued to raise funds for charitable work.

#### **E. The “Blue Laws” and Shabbos**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Baltimore became a great manufacturing center. Factory workers worked from Monday morning until mid-day Saturday, which is when they received their wages for the week. During this period (and actually until the 1980s) Baltimore and most of America had “blue laws,” which required stores to be closed on Sunday, the Christian day of rest. For these reasons, a majority of Christians made most of their purchases on Saturday afternoon. These circumstances posed a difficult problem for Orthodox Jewish storekeepers, who were forbidden by Jewish law from engaging in business during Shabbos – the period between sunset on Friday and sunset on Saturday. If a store was closed on Saturday, the storekeeper would likely lose his business and home and be forced to become dependent upon charity to support his family.

Benjamin’s wife Celia offered a solution. She would keep the store open and wait on customers so that he would not have to personally violate the Sabbath. But the guilt of having his wife violating the Sabbath weighed heavily upon his soul. He developed heart disease and died at the age of 58. It is my personal belief that his life was cut short by the stress of attempting to find a balance between the laws of his faith and the laws of his new country.

#### **F. The Boys Scouts of America**

In 1908, British Lt. General Robert Baden-Powell founded what is known as the “Scouting Movement,” a program in which boys wear the uniforms of “explorers” and participate in outdoor activities, learning the skills that come from living in forests. The program was praised for teaching boys self-confidence, morals, and leadership and quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. In the United States the program is called the “Boy Scouts of America.” My father was born in 1920 and when he was about 10 years old he asked his father Benjamin if he too could join a scout “troop.” Benjamin would not allow it: The scouting program reminded him too much of the hated czarist army that he had seen in Lithuania.

#### **G. The Talmudical Academy of Baltimore**

The Telshe Yeshiva established a series of related institutions which, together, made Telšiai one of the country’s three largest centers for Jewish education and attracted students from throughout the world. Within a few years the yeshiva created a complete educational system: a kindergarten, a primary school, a girls’ school, a gymnasium [secondary school] for girls, and a women’s Hebrew teachers’ college. The entire Jewish world watched these developments with great admiration.

Rabbi Abraham Nachman Schwartz (1871-1937), a native of Shidlove / Šiluva, had attended the Telshe Yeshiva before emigrating to the United States in 1905. In 1917, he founded Baltimore’s Talmudical Academy. Like the Telshe Yeshiva, the curriculum of the Baltimore school included both religious subjects and all basic secular subjects.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Schwartz’s grandson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Poliakoff (1914-2011), a native of Baltimore, attended the Telshe Yeshiva in Lithuania from 1930 to 1939 and later became the chief rabbi of Baltimore’s Orthodox Jewish community. In 2009, Rabbi Poliakoff published *Minhagei Lita: Customs of Lithuanian Jewry*, which focused on the religious practices and ethical values of Lithuanian Jews that he had learned at the Telshe Yeshiva, see, <https://www.litvaks.org/projects/minhagei-lita-customs-of-lithuanian-jewry/>.

When Benjamin's son Solomon (my father) was old enough, he attended the Talmudical Academy and his education there was probably quite similar to the education that his father had received at the Telshe Yeshiva. One of the memories in the family is that when my father would return home from school, Benjamin would spend time reviewing what his son had learned that day in school.

## **II. The Jewish Community of Telšiai**

Orthodox Jews throughout the world immediately recognize the name "Telshe." To them, the name refers first and foremost to the yeshiva – the school of advanced Judaic studies – that was in Telšiai from 1875 until 1940. For those who are more knowledgeable about the history of Jewish education, the name also refers to the teaching methods known as the "Lithuanian model." The school followed the educational philosophy of the Vilna Ga'on, but the comprehensive complex of related institutions that grew up around the yeshiva was unique. And the example is admired by Jewish communities throughout the world.

Jews lived in Telšiai for several centuries. Statistical data from more recent eras gives a sense of their prominence in the town in different time periods. In 1797, there were 1,650 Jews, or 66% of the total population of 2,500. In 1847, the town's Jewish population was 2,248, possibly out of a total population of about 5,000. In 1870, Telšiai had 6,481 residents, including 4,399 Jews (68%). In 1897 the number of Jewish residents fell to 3,088, constituting 51% of the town's 6,000 inhabitants. In 1939, Telšiai had a total population of 8,000, of whom 2,800 were Jews. Nearly all were murdered in or near Telšiai in 1941.

### **A. The Early History of Jews in Lithuania and Telšiai**

The story of the Jewish community of Telšiai, of course, is much older than the available statistics, and it is part of the larger story of Jews in "Litva, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania."

In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the Duchies of Samogitia, Lithuania, and Poland were separate countries. Their economies were agricultural and were organized around noblemen who owned large tracts of land and the serfs who worked on those estates.

In Western Europe, which also had "manorial" agricultural societies, rulers had seen the wealth of their countries increase by encouraging the development of towns for trading. Jews were central to the economic prosperity of those towns. "In Trier, Mainz, Aachen, Cologne, Worms, and more than 100 medieval towns in Central Europe, the Jewish district was both a central and a prime location, close to the economic heart of the city. The German Bishop Rüdiger, in granting a charter of the city of Speyer in 1084, wrote, 'I thought that I would increase the glory of our city a thousand-fold if I were to include Jews.'"<sup>12</sup>

The rulers of Poland and Lithuania sought to gain the same benefits by inviting Germans and Jews to establish trading centers in their countries. In 1264, Polish Duke Boleslaw the Pious issued the famous General Charter of Jewish Liberties ("General Charter"), which is also known as Statute of Kalisz. The charter is considered to be among the first human rights laws in European history. When the rule of Poland and Lithuania merged with the marriage of Jadwiga and Jogaila in

---

<sup>12</sup> "Where Did Yiddish Come From?" by Prof. Cherie Woodworth, *Tablet*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/yiddish-ashkenazi-woodworth>.

1386, the protections of the charter were extended to Lithuania. In 1422, Samogitia came under the control of Lithuania. It is assumed that Jews began to move to Telšiai soon after that date.



“Casimir III the Great,” by Arthur Szyk (1894-1951), Frontispiece of *Le Statut de Kalisz (Statute of Kalisz)*, Editions de la Table Ronde, Paris, 1932.

In 1569, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were combined into a single state, the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. Soon after, the new state officially recognized a Council as the central body of Jewish communities in the state’s territory. In 1623, the Jewish communities in Lithuania withdrew and formed their own council. The first mention of the Jewish community of Telšiai appears in an early record of the Council of the Land of Lithuania (“Va’ad Medinas Lita” / ועד מדינת ליטא). The record states that the community was part of the “kahal” of Kėdainiai. A kahal was a self-governing group that handled the affairs of the community.

In 1795, the Russian Empire annexed Lithuania. Initially, this appeared to have a positive effect on Telšiai. The economy steadily improved and more people moved to the town. In 1797, 2,500 people lived in Telšiai, of whom 1,650 were Jews (66%). By 1847, the town’s total population had doubled, to about 5,000, and the Jewish population was 2,248.

Jews built four synagogues in the town and were generally able to practice their faith and increase the strength of their educational and charitable institutions through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. For Jews in Telšiai, like Jews throughout the Pale of Settlement, life was centered on the obligations of their religion. The Torah – the Five Books of Moses – not only tells the story of beginning of the Jewish people but also sets forth 613 commandments, including the well-known Ten Commandments.

The Sabbath – “Šabos” – was a holy day of rest. No form of work was permitted – even animals had to be given rest on the Sabbath. Šabos began at sunset on Friday evening and ended at sunset on Saturday. Before the arrival of the Sabbath, shops closed early and households were busy with preparations. The Sabbath “Queen” was welcomed into the home at the beginning of Šabos

and much of the time was spent in a peaceful period with family and friends and at prayers and in study. As one Telšiai native recalled, “On Sabbath eve everyone was busy, running around preparing for the Shabbat. With darkness, Sabbath candles were lit in every home and peace and holiness filled the city's void. The men went to the synagogue dressed in special Sabbath clothes, ready to welcome the Sabbath Queen. ... Of course, all the shops were closed on the Sabbath.”<sup>13</sup> The spiritual value of the Sabbath in Žemaitija was highlighted in the yizkor book for the Jewish community of *Gargždai*, a town on the border between the Russian and German empires, notes that religious Jews who traveled to the nearby Prussian city of Memel (Klaipėda) would not under any circumstance want to spend Shabbos there. “[T]rue piety and the true *Shabbos* it was felt was only kept in Zamet [Žemaitija].”<sup>14</sup>

The Russians weakened the authority of the kahals and adopted a number of strategies designed to make the Jews abandon their faith and become “Russified.” The Russians also adopted strategies to Russify their Polish and Lithuanian minorities with the same objective – creating assimilate Russian subjects. These pressures ended in 1915, when the Imperial German army permanently drove the czarist government out of Lithuania.

## **B. Telšiai at the Hopeful Time of the Beginning of the New, Free Lithuania**

In the Spring of 1915, as the Imperial German army advanced on Lithuania, the czarist army ordered the Jews who lived in a certain part of Central Lithuania, including the Jews in Telšiai, into exile in the interior of Russia. Most of the deportees, as well as Lithuanians who fled east, were not able to return to Lithuania until 1920.

In November 1918 the newly formed Lithuanian state was invaded by the Bolshevik army. In December, the government issued an appeal in four languages – Lithuanian, Yiddish, Polish, and Belorussian<sup>15</sup> – asking for volunteers to fight for the country’s survival. More fighting followed, against the Bermontians and the Poles. Jews volunteered and fought alongside their fellow countrymen to defend Lithuania’s independence.

Jews in Lithuania – and worldwide – strongly supported Lithuania’s request for international recognition at the Versailles Peace Conference.<sup>16</sup> As Professor Alfred E. Senn wrote:

When Lithuanian leaders established an independent state after World War I, they in fact found considerable support among the Jews. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the Lithuanian delegation made

---

<sup>13</sup> “Way of life, memories and public life,” by Dr. Malka Blechman Israeli, English translation by Sara Mages, *The Telshe Book*, p. 204, <https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/telsiai/tel203.html#Page233>.

<sup>14</sup> “Gorzd – A Shtetl in Lithuania,” by Chaim Shoys, English Translation by Gloria Berkenstat Freund, *Gorzd book: A memorial to the Jewish community of Gorzd (Gargždai, Lithuania)*, Ed. Yitzhak Alperovitz, pp. 19, 22, <https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Gargzdai/gar017.html>.

<sup>15</sup> “From Imperial Soldiers to National Guardians: German and Lithuanian Volunteers after the Great War, 1918-1919,” by Tomas Balkelis, *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, (Editors: Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins), Palgrave Macmillan (2013), 133.

<sup>16</sup> Stein, *Lita*, Section 10, “The Return Home to Lithuania,” pp. 89-118, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lita/lit0089.html>; “The History of Jews in Lithuania,” by Dr. Mark Wischnitzer (“Wischnitzer”), *The Lithuanian Slaughter Of Its Jews: Testimonies from 121 Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Lithuania, recorded by Leyb Koniuchowsky, in Displaced Persons' camps (1946-48)*, Translated into English by Dr Jonathan Boyarin, Compiled and Published by David Solly Sandler (2020), (“Koniuchowsky”), p. 19 (“American Jews of Lithuanian origin played an important role in obtaining United States recognition of Lithuania (July 28, 1922).”)

extraordinary promises to Jews concerning their cultural and even political autonomy, and, according to Ezra Mendelsohn, there was “a Jewish tendency in Vilna (in Lithuanian “Vilnius” and “Wilno” in Polish) and elsewhere to prefer a Lithuanian to a Polish (or Soviet) ‘solution’.” Jewish intellectuals such as Simon Rosenbaum and Jacob Robinson made important contributions to the theoretical and practical development of the concept of Lithuanian statehood. [footnote omitted]<sup>17</sup>

For its part, the Lithuanian delegation to the League of Nations submitted the following solemn declaration guaranteeing the rights of Jews (and other minorities) in Lithuania:

... [Whereas Lithuania desires, of her own free will, to grant secure guarantees of freedom and justice to all the inhabitants in her territory irrespective of race, language and religion,

The Representative of the Lithuanian Government makes the following declaration before the Council of the League of Nations:

## DECLARATION

### Article I

The stipulations of this Declaration are recognized as fundamental laws of Lithuania and no law, regulation or official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation or official action now or in the future, prevail over them.

### Article II

Full and complete protection of life and liberty will be assured to all inhabitants of Lithuania, without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion.

All inhabitants of Lithuania will be entitled to the free exercise, whether public or private, of any creed, religion or belief, whose practices are not inconsistent with public order or public morals.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, Lithuania kept its commitments. In Lithuania’s first constitution, which was adopted on August 1, 1922,<sup>19</sup> ethnic minorities were given equal political and cultural rights and were encouraged to share in the responsibilities of building the new state. In the executive branch, cabinet-level ministries were established for the Jewish and Belarussian minorities. In the legislative branch, committees and sub-committees had at least one member representing ethnic minorities.<sup>20</sup> During the first years of the Republic, several Jewish officers served in the army and a number of senior Jewish officials in the administration, including a Minister for Jewish Affairs.

---

<sup>17</sup> “Reflections On The Holocaust In Lithuania: A New Book By Alfonsas Eidintas,” by Alfred E. Senn, *Lituanus* (Winter 2001), [http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01\\_4\\_05.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01_4_05.htm), citing his own work in *The Great Powers, Lithuania and the Vilna Question* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1966).

<sup>18</sup> League of Nations – Treaty Series, No. 569, Declaration [] Concerning the Protection of Minorities in Lithuania, Signed at Geneva, May 12, 1922, <http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1924/25.html>.

<sup>19</sup> “The Structure and Operation of Lithuania’s Parliamentary Democracy,” by Juozas B. Laučka, *Lituanus* (Fall 1986), (“Laučka”) [http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86\\_3\\_01.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86_3_01.htm), Part I, Section 1.

<sup>20</sup> Laučka, Part II, Section 1 [http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86\\_3\\_01.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86_3_01.htm)



1. Left: Seal of the Jewish Affairs Ministry; Right: Seal of the Jewish National Council of Lithuania

Laws were adopted creating a democratically elected Jewish National Council and democratically elected local councils that could address issues of community concern. Jews were also authorized to create their own educational system. Dozens of Jewish schools were established which taught in Yiddish or Hebrew (which the state preferred over the languages of the successive occupying powers, Russian and German).<sup>21</sup> These schools were officially recognized by the authorities and integrated in the Lithuanian public school system. The teachers in these schools were considered state employees.<sup>22</sup>

As noted above, toward the end of the czarist era, in 1897, 6,000 people lived in Telšiai, of whom 3,088 were Jews (51%). In 1923, the town's population was 4,691, of whom 1,545, or 33%, were Jews.<sup>23</sup> The growing importance of the Telshe Yeshiva partially offset the population loss, and an increasing proportion of the Jews in Telšiai were involved in the activities of the yeshiva's educational institutions.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1920s, most Jews in Telšiai were involved in shop-keeping and crafts. Shops were typically on the first floor of a two-storied building and husbands and wives usually worked together, joined by their children on market days. There was a wide variety of Jewish artisans, such as tailors, shoemakers, harness makers, butchers, bakers, barbers, watchmakers, stitchers, painters, glaziers, and oven builders.<sup>25</sup>

In 1923, Lithuania took control of the East Prussian seaport of Memel (Klaipėda) and the surrounding region.<sup>26</sup> Lithuania then built a railroad line from Kaunas, its inter-war capital, through Telšiai to the port. The completion of this line, in 1927, also improved Telšiai's general economic position and the population of Jews and Christians increased.

<sup>21</sup> *EJC:L*, "Part 3: The Jews in independent Lithuania between the two World Wars (cont.), Section N "Education and Culture," English translation by Shimon Joffe, p. 54, [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_lita/lit\\_00054.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_lita/lit_00054.html).

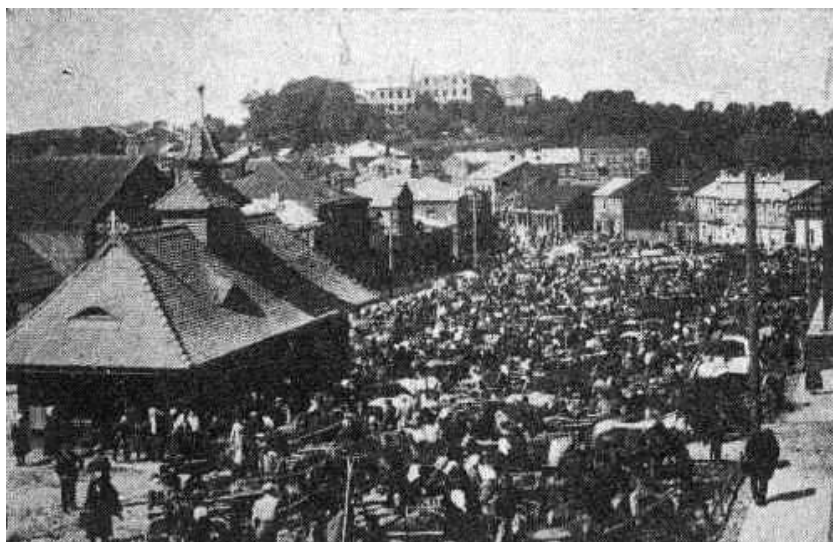
<sup>22</sup> *EJC:L*, "Part 3: The Jews in independent Lithuania between the two World Wars, Section M "Jews in the economy and society," translated into English by Shimon Joffe ("ECJ:L, Section M"), p. 49, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_lita/lit\\_00039.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_lita/lit_00039.html).

<sup>23</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 538, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html).

<sup>24</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 534, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html). (" 'The Great Yeshivah' was a source of income of many families, who supplied living quarters and food for hundreds of its students.")

<sup>25</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 540, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html).

<sup>26</sup> From 1422 until 1922, Memel / Klaipėda, and the surrounding area, known as Memelland / Klaipėdos rajonas, were part of Prussia. They were not in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.



2. “A view of a market day in Telz,” *The Telshe Book*, p. 28,  
<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html>



3. “Jewish stores in Telsiai, Lithuania, July 11, 1933.” Photo provided by Solly Meltzer to the archives of Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish People, <https://dbs.bh.org.il/place/telsiai>.

The Jews of Telšiai continued their centuries-old tradition of joining and supporting social-welfare societies, such as those for visiting the sick, for feeding and hosting the poor, for providing free burials for poor families, and for extending interest-free loans. It also had a hospital, and an OZE clinic, and summer camps for handicapped children.<sup>27</sup> As in other Jewish communities, the “foundation stones” of the Telšiai Jewish community were charity and mutual aid.<sup>28</sup>

There was a library with Yiddish and Hebrew books and periodical literature and numerous social and cultural organizations. The most active were those that were oriented toward Orthodox

<sup>27</sup> Horovitz, *The Telshe Book*, p. 17, and Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 30, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>. “OZE” is an acronym for Общество Здравоохранения Еврейиев, a Jewish health-care organization.

<sup>28</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 30, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

Judaism, but there were also secular groups.<sup>29</sup> And there were a variety of groups that were devoted to Zionism, including learning the skills that would be needed to settle in a Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>30</sup>

Other centers of Jewish life in Telšiai were the four houses of prayer. Three were in the “Jewish Quarter,” which was near the market square, and the fourth was at the beginning of President Street (Prezidento gatvė). The Jews of Telšiai were very religious and every day the houses of prayer were full for morning and evening services.<sup>31</sup>

Yiddish and Hebrew were the languages of communication and for contracts and record-keeping. As in the days of the kahals, disputes between Jews were brought before the town’s rabbi for disposition.

### C. Lithuania’s Transformation Into An Exclusionary, Ethno-Linguistic State

Despite the optimism that Lithuanian Jews felt immediately after the Wars of Independence, conditions deteriorated within a few years. On April 10, 1922, the Seimas deleted key paragraphs of the constitution which were fundamental to nationality ministries and minority language rights.<sup>32</sup> The second Seimas, which was in office from May 1923 until May 1926, embarked upon a legislative program that discriminated against Jewish interests and promoted those of ethnic Lithuanians. For example, taxation rules discriminated against Jewish industrialists, artisans, and merchants.<sup>33</sup>

A Festivals Law forbade all business activity on Sunday and moved trade fairs to Saturday, the Jewish day of rest.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, a state-language law was adopted that required that all commercial records, correspondence, signs, advertising, and other public notices only be written in the Lithuanian language.<sup>35</sup> Historically, Jews spoke and wrote Yiddish and Hebrew and during the 120 years of czarist regimes had learned Russian, which most educated people in Lithuania used for academic studies and to discuss modern ideas. As Prof. Saulius Sužiedėlis notes, some “nationalist youth” took it upon themselves enforce the law by painting over storefront signs that were in Yiddish or Polish.<sup>36</sup> In other cases, many business or professional notices written in Yiddish were covered with tar.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 28-29, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>30</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 29 and 33, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>31</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 29, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>32</sup> Wischnitzer, Koniuchowsky, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> *EJC:L*, Section K, p. 39, [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_lita/lit\\_00039.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_lita/lit_00039.html); see also, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania*, by Dov Levin (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2000) (“*The Litvaks*”), p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> Greenbaum, p. 253-254.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*; Greenbaum, pp. 245-246, 254-255. (These laws contravened the League of Nations provisions on “equality before the law with special reference to race, language and religion.” As Greenbaum notes, [l]ocal Jews compared their situation with that of the 800,000 Lithuanians in America, who were free to use their language as they saw fit.”); see also, Wischnitzer, Koniuchowsky, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> *EJC:L*, Section K, p. 39, [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_lita/lit\\_00039.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_lita/lit_00039.html). In his memoirs, Lithuanian aviator Leonardas Peseckas wrote that he had tarred Jewish signs in 1926 and participated in the military coup later that year “Nakties Darbai” (“Night Works”), *Karo Lakūno Pasakojimai (Stories of a Military Pilot)*, (Raidė, Kaunas, 1992) pp. 64-65.

The state language law also put Jews at a disadvantage with respect to gaining a higher education. Although the government did not adopt strict quotas to limit the number of Jews who could attend institutions of higher learning, the introduction of a Lithuanian-proficiency requirement for admission significantly reduced the number of Jewish students who were admitted.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, by 1929, young Jews were quickly learning to speak Lithuanian well and learn Lithuanian literature.<sup>39</sup>

In April 1924, the position of Minister of Jewish Affairs was abolished and the police halted a scheduled meeting of the Jewish National Council in September 1924. On March 8, 1926, the government disbanded the local Jewish community councils, thereby ending the centuries-old institution of Lithuanian Jewish community self-governance, dating back to the first kahals.<sup>40</sup>

The vision of a democratic, multi-cultural Lithuanian state finally came to an end on December 17, 1926, when a group of military officers removed the elected president, Kazys Grinius, and installed the authoritarian regime that would remain in power for the rest of the inter-war period. The position of prime minister was given to Augustinas Voldemaras and Antanas Smetona was installed as the president.<sup>41</sup> On April 12, 1927, Smetona dissolved the Seimas without setting a date for a new election.<sup>42</sup> As Masha Greenbaum writes, “This marked the end of democratic Lithuania. With the demise of the parliament, Lithuanian Jewish hopes and aspirations for national autonomy perished as well.”<sup>43</sup>

In general, the various commitments to allow Jews to participate in government were ignored. Jews were steadily driven out of military, police, and most civilian government positions.<sup>44</sup> On August 1, 1927, President Smetona made clear to a Jewish delegation that his government would not honor the promises contained in the August 5, 1919, Paris Declaration: Our hero Vitowt [Vytautas the Great (c. 1350-1430)] gave the Jews much freedom. Nor shall we withhold freedom from the Jews. But we demand of them that they should have in mind the needs of the state and should not form a state within a state. The Jews will do well to depend on the Lithuanian State instead of depending on certain papers and instead of remembering that the Jewish rights were guaranteed at [Versailles],” the President said.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 13; See, also, Lestschinsky, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/rokiskis/rok066.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 15, citing *Lietuvos Aidas*, 20 August 1929; Atamukas, [http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01\\_4\\_03.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01_4_03.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Wischnitzer, Koniuchowsky, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Wischnitzer, Koniuchowsky, p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Laučka, Part IV. [http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86\\_3\\_01.htm#Ref3](http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86_3_01.htm#Ref3).

<sup>43</sup> Greenbaum, p. 261.

<sup>44</sup> *EJC:L*, Section M, p.49, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_lita/lit\\_00039.html#Page49](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_lita/lit_00039.html#Page49) (“The process of dispossession of the Jews from their economic status proceeded gradually but systematically. First of all, nearly all the Jews serving in the police force or the standing army were discharged. Out of 35,000 government and municipal officials in 1934, only 477 (1.35%) were Jewish; this number includes 273 teachers in Jewish schools.”); *The Litvaks*, p. 141; related, “Rabinavicius, Lithuanian Consul General in New York, Resigns His Post: Compelled to Resign Because He Is Jew, He Says,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, Long Island City, New York, August 7, 1927, pp. 1 and 3 (“Henrikas Rabinavicius, Consul General of the Lithuanian Republic in New York, quit his post yesterday. The Jewish Daily Bulletin learns that the resignation of Mr. Rabinavicius was forced by Prime Minister, Professor Voldemaras, and was due to the fact that Mr. Rabinavicius is a Jew. Prime Minister Voldemaras stated that he did not wish to retain a Jew in a diplomatic position.”),

[http://pdfs.jta.org/1927/1927-08-07\\_832.pdf?\\_ga=2.176803558.252756308.1533606548-179223819.1514423101](http://pdfs.jta.org/1927/1927-08-07_832.pdf?_ga=2.176803558.252756308.1533606548-179223819.1514423101).

<sup>45</sup> “Forget Versailles, Jews Are Advised by Smetona, Lithuanian President,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 14, 1927, <http://www.jta.org/1927/08/14/archive/forget-versailles-jews-are-advised-by-smetona-lithuanian-president>.

With this announcement it was clear that the rights of Jews in Lithuania would thereafter be entirely a matter of arbitrary government discretion.

As the inter-war period continued, Lithuania's Jews came under increasing economic pressures. The Lithuanian Merchants Organization (Verslas), through its periodical *Verslas* (The Merchant), urged ethnic Lithuanians not to buy from Jews or even have employment relations with Jews. The Smetona regime had a close relationship with Verslas and made the state radio station available to the group to make bitterly anti-Semitic broadcasts.<sup>46</sup> More generally, Verslas adopted the political slogan, "Lithuania for the Lithuanians," and demanded that the government expel all Jews who entered Lithuania after 1918.<sup>47</sup> These actions manifest what Prof. Sužiedėlis characterizes as "exclusionary nationalism."<sup>48</sup>

The government also organized cooperative businesses by which ethnic Lithuanians could compete against Jews in a number of markets.<sup>49</sup> The trade in meat, dairy products, and agricultural machinery was concentrated, respectively, in the Maistas Meat Consortium, the Pienocentras Dairy Consortium, and the Lietukis Company, which also handled all import and export activities in these markets.<sup>50</sup> In Telšiai, as well, Lithuanians opened modern retail stores. The net effect of these changes was that beginning in the mid-1920s many Jewish businesses saw a decline in income and went bankrupt.

There was also an increase in anti-Semitic attacks in Telšiai and elsewhere in Lithuania.<sup>51</sup> Many yizkor books note that in this period Jews were particularly fearful of violence and property destruction.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> "Lithuania Bows to Anti-Semite Boycott Drive," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, December 3, 1934, <https://www.jta.org/1934/12/03/archive/lithuania-bows-to-anti-semite-boycott-drive>. This news report noted the close relationship between the state government and the Verslas group: The general secretary of Smetona's political party was "the theoretician and the backbone of the Verslas [organization]." Moreover, the honorary president of Verslas was Lithuania's deputy minister of finance. *Id.* See also, Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 11-12.

<sup>47</sup> *The Litvaks*, p. 141.

<sup>48</sup> Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Wischnitzer, Koniuchowsky, p. 18. ("The government supported Lithuanian cooperatives, and offered them several advantages which handicapped Jewish trade and labor. This contravened the provisions of Article VI of the minority rights declaration of May 12, 1922 [to the League of Nations].")

<sup>50</sup> *The Litvaks*, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> Lestschinsky, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/rokiskis/rok066.html>; see also, Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), pp. 16-17 (in Footnote 55, Sužiedėlis says that a "brief but comprehensive overview of the situation of the mid-1930s" can be found on page 144-146 of *Lietuvos žydų kelias, Nuo XIV amžiaus iki XX a. pabaigos*, by Solomonas Atamkus (Alma Littera, Vilnius, 1998), and *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, Ed. David Bankier and Israel Gutman (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2009), p. 251 ("There was a rise in vandalism against Jewish property and accusation of blood libel. ... [T]he growing antisemitism during the 1930s was reflected in the activities not only of political organizations like Iron Wolf (*Geležinis vilkas*) or Young Lithuania (*Jaunoji Lietuva*), but also of the Lithuanian Business Association (*Lietuvių verslinių sąjunga*), which began publishing the anti-Semitic weekly *Verslas* (Business) in 1932."))

<sup>52</sup> Blood-libel accusations and attacks on Jews and their property in the inter-war period are noted to have occurred in various places in provincial Lithuania, such as, for example, Marijampolė, Šančiai, Linkuva, and Ariogala (1924), Lestschinsky, <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/rokiskis/rok066.html> (English translation), and <https://ia801907.us.archive.org/11/items/nybc303926/nybc303926.pdf> (Hebrew original) pp. 77-81, and [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania3/lit3\\_002.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania3/lit3_002.html) (Linkuva); Pandėlys (1932) <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/rokiskis/rok066.html>; Kražiai and Varniai, (December 19, 1935) (In this incident, 33 Jews were wounded, and one was seriously wounded. A January 11, 1936, report stated that a victim in Varniai had died, and added, "The Jews in the entire region are terrified. Those who led the pogrom are fomenting a wild hatred against the Jewish community." <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/rokiskis/rok066.html>); and Plunge (1935 and 1939),

As occurred in the late czarist era, many Lithuanian Jews tried to find ways to emigrate in the period 1925 to 1940. However, circumstances had substantially changed. The United States, which had welcomed tens of thousands of Litvaks in the period 1881-1915, severely restricted immigration after the First World War.<sup>53</sup> South Africa, which, like the United States, had accepted Jewish emigrants from Lithuania before the First World War, was still an available destination from 1920 until 1930.<sup>54</sup> After 1930, fewer than 500 Lithuanian Jews per year were able to emigrate to South Africa.<sup>55</sup>



4. “The last meeting before the immigration of a friend from Telz to Israel (9 August 1926),” from the article, “Memories from my childhood in Telz,” by Tzila (Varias) Weinstein, English translation by Sara Mages, *The Telshe Book*, p. 229, <https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/telsiai/tel203.html#Page233>

Some Lithuanian Jews moved to the Holy Land.<sup>56</sup> Organizations in Telšiai and elsewhere in Lithuania helped to overcome some of the challenges by teaching such subjects as modern Hebrew – the common language of the Jews returning from many other lands – and agricultural skills needed in a hot, arid climate.

Another option was to move to the Klaipėdos rajonas, which from 1924 until 1939 was under Lithuanian control, but was also subject to treaty obligations which guaranteed minority rights.

[http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Pinkas\\_Lita/lit\\_00484.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Pinkas_Lita/lit_00484.html); see also, Sužiedėlis Historical Sources, [https://yivo.org/cimages/historical\\_sources\\_of\\_antisemitism.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/historical_sources_of_antisemitism.pdf), p. 16-17, 24.

<sup>53</sup> In the period 1905-1914, an average of one million Europeans emigrated annually to the United States. Under a 1924 American law, as revised in 1927, the United States would only accept each year 150,000 European immigrants, of whom only 30% could be from countries other than the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, and Austria. “European Emigration Overseas Past and Future,” by H.A. Citroen (Spring Science+Business Media, Dordrecht, 1951), pp. 17-18.

<sup>54</sup> “Charges New Immigration Quota Law in South Africa Aimed Directly at Jews,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, February 13, 1930, <https://www.jta.org/1930/02/13/archive/charges-new-immigration-quota-law-in-south-africa-aimed-directly-at-jews>.

<sup>55</sup> *EJC:L*, Part 3, Section L “Demography and Statistics,” “Table 21: Jewish emigration from Lithuania, by host countries (1929-1939),” p. 46, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas\\_Lita/lit\\_00039.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Pinkas_Lita/lit_00039.html). Prof. Levin notes that the situation was particularly dire for young Jews from small towns “who were unable to find work even after they moved to the cities. ... Thus, on the eve of World War II, Lithuania had become – in the words of the contemporary Jewish sociologist Jacob Lestschinsky – ‘a cage without hope for Jewish youth.’” *The Litvaks*, p. 143.

<sup>56</sup> The Vilna Ga’on himself had embarked upon such a journey in 1778 but went only as far as Amsterdam before returning to Lithuania. Many of his disciples, however, did emigrate. By 1813, 511 of his followers had settled in the Land of Israel. *The Vilna Gaon and His Messianic Vision*, by Dr. Arie Morgenstern (Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2012), pp. 333ff.; *Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, by Arie Morgenstern (Oxford University Press, New York, 2006), Preface and pp. 201-202.

However, in March 1939, Lithuania was forced to return the region to Germany. Many of the Jewish refugees from Klaipėda settled in Telšiai, Šiauliai, and Tauragė, where the local Jewish communities cared for them. In 1939, Telšiai's total population rose to about 8,000, of whom about 2,800, or 35%, were Jews.<sup>57</sup>

Most likely one of those refugees was Tomor Josselioskytė, who attended Telšiai's Hebrew-language Yavne gymnasium for girls' gymnasium from January to August 1940. She was born in Klaipėda in November 1926.



5. Tomor Josseliovskytė, who was born in Klaipėda in 1926 and began her studies at the Telšiai Yavne girls' gymnasium in January 1940. Lithuanian Central State Archives, Telšiai Branch, F. 1382, ap. 1, byla 375.

#### **D. The Violent End of the Telšiai Jews in 1941**

Under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 1939, Nazi Germany invaded the western half of Poland on September 1, 1939, thereby beginning the Second World War. On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Union seized the eastern half of Poland. The two allies thus extinguished the Republic of Poland. In October 1939, Stalin transferred the Vilnius region to Lithuania in return for the right to station Soviet troops in Lithuania. In June 1940, the Soviets exploited this advantage to end the independence of Lithuania.<sup>58</sup>

The Soviets moved rapidly to convert Lithuania country into a Soviet state. Religious and private schools and organizations were disbanded, privately held businesses were nationalized,

---

<sup>57</sup> *Lithuanian Jewish Communities*, Nancy Schoenburg and Stuart Schoenburg, Garland Publishing, Inc. (1991, New York and London), p. 309.

<sup>58</sup> In Chapter 4 of his history *Lietuvių ir žydų santykiai: nuo XIX a. pabaigos iki 1941 birželio*, (Leidykla, Vilnius, 2005), Prof. Dr. Liudas Truska details the warm welcome Lithuanian leaders, organizations, and ordinary people initially showed for the pro-Soviet government led by Justas Paleckis. He notes, for example, articles in the June 19-21, 1940, editions of *Lietuvos aidas* reporting the greetings offered by the Seimas Presidium, the army, the Šauliai (riflemen) group, and a delegation representing ethnic Lithuanian cooperatives, such as Lietūkis, as well as articles in other publications reporting greetings from the "Pavasaris" Catholic Youth Federation, and Verslas, the Lithuanian business group. Truska believed that no Jewish organization greeted the new government. However, the June 25, 1940, edition of *Apžvalga*, the publication of Lithuanian Jewish war veterans, did send a greeting but coupled with an expectation that the new administration would defend Lithuania's liberty, <https://www.epaveldas.lt/recordImageSmall/LNB/C10000036848?exId=93981&seqNr=1>. This was the last edition of *Apžvalga*. Soon after, the new administration closed the publication.

individuals were only allowed a certain amount of assets – the rest were confiscated. The Soviets were hostile to all organized religions and no doubt made it difficult for the Jews of Telšiai to observe the requirements of their faith. Then, beginning on June 14, 1941, the Soviet secret police arrested 17,500 Lithuanian citizens and sent them to Siberia. Of this number, about 1,700, or about 9% were Jews,<sup>59</sup> including at least 13 Jews from Telšiai.<sup>60</sup>

A week later, Nazi Germany invaded Lithuania. The religious Jews of Telšiai had had no involvement with communism<sup>61</sup> and believed that the Germans would not cause them severe harm.<sup>62</sup> After all, the Germans who had occupied Lithuania from 1915 to 1918 were comparatively more tolerant than the Russians. In addition, although refugees from German-occupied Poland likely told them of harsh German laws that discriminated against Poles and Jews, those refugees would not have observed anything to suggest the unimaginable ordeals and mass murder that would begin on June 22, 1941.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, the Jews could not have anticipated that many of their Lithuanian neighbors had been deeply involved in a plan to end the presence of Jews in Lithuania once the Nazis attacked. In the Fall of 1940, a former Lithuanian diplomat in Berlin organized the “Lithuanian Activist Front” (“LAF”), an underground organization that would stage an uprising against the Soviets at such time that Nazi Germany turned on its Soviet ally.

The diplomat drafted “Instructions for the Liberation of Lithuania” (“Nurodymai Lietuvai Išlaisvinti”), which stated that the expulsion of the Soviets must be used as an opportunity to eliminate

---

<sup>59</sup> “Multidirectional memory and the deportation of Lithuanian Jews,” by Violeta Davoliūtė, (Ethnicity Studies, 2015/2, pp. 131–150, Lithuanian Cultural Research Institute, Vilnius), [www.academia.edu/24804269/Multidirectional\\_memory\\_and\\_the\\_deportation\\_of\\_Lithuanian\\_Jews](http://www.academia.edu/24804269/Multidirectional_memory_and_the_deportation_of_Lithuanian_Jews); see also, Atamukas, [http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01\\_4\\_03.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/2001/01_4_03.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 550, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html).

<sup>61</sup> In fact, very few Lithuanians did. Laučka observed that membership in Lithuania’s Communist party was “very small.” Laučka, Part IV, [http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86\\_3\\_01.htm#Ref3](http://www.lituanus.org/1986/86_3_01.htm#Ref3), citing sources that show that in June 1940 (when the Soviets seized control of Lithuania), the Communist Party of Lithuania only had 1,863 members and that by the beginning of 1941 the membership had risen only to 2,054. Laučka, Part IV, Footnote 7. Lithuania’s population at the time that the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania was about 2.88 million. “Documents, An OSS Report,” *Lituanus*, Volume 27, No. 3 - Fall 1981 (Ed.: Prof. Saulius Sužiedėlis), [http://www.lituanus.org/1981\\_3/81\\_3\\_07.htm](http://www.lituanus.org/1981_3/81_3_07.htm). Moreover, the Party was led by ethnic Lithuanians. Eidintas, Žalys, & Senn, p. 125.

<sup>62</sup> “The Slaughter Of Jews In The Lithuanian County Seat Telzh (Telshiai),” Koniuchowsky, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> The Germans did not adopt a policy to mass-murder Jews until the January 20, 1942, “Wannsee Conference.” As of mid-1941, the Nazis may only have been considering the possibility of deporting the Jews under their control to Siberia. “Kazys Skirpa: Saviour of Independence or Perpetrator of Crimes against Humanity,” by Andrius Kulikaukas, *Delfi*, June 15, 2017, <https://en.delfi.lt/archive/kazys-skirpa-saviour-of-independence-or-perpetrator-of-crimes-against-humanity.d?id=74946652>. (Lithuanian: “K. Škirpa: nepriklausomybės gelbėtojas ar nusikaltėlis žmonijai?,” *Delfi*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/k-skirpa-nepriklausomybes-gelbetojas-ar-nusikaltelis-zmonijai.d?id=74785430>). Indeed, it was only on July 31, 1941, that Hermann Göring directed Reinhard Heydrick to prepare a plan for the “total solution to the Jewish question.” *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942 (Comprehensive History of the Holocaust)*, by Christopher R. Browning (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2007), p. 277.

the presence of Jews in the country.<sup>64</sup> Another declaration made clear that the LAF could confiscate all Jewish property.<sup>65</sup>

When the Germans launched their attack, Telšiai was taken over by local LAF members before the Germans arrived. The LAF “fighters” immediately embarked upon a campaign of violence against the Jews.<sup>66</sup> They beat up Jews in the streets, broke into Jewish homes, and dragged Torah scrolls out of the synagogues and defaced them.<sup>67</sup> On June 28, a visiting American was in his family’s home when LAF militiamen ordered everyone to leave the house. The American did not follow the instructions but instead showed the armed men the documents proving his American citizenship. He was shot in the home. A yeshiva student was also shot in his home. These were the first two Jews killed in Telšiai.<sup>68</sup>

The Jews were systematically robbed, humiliated, tortured, and killed. The detailed account of Rabbi Ephraim Oshry<sup>69</sup> states that the cruelties and mass executions that the Jews of Telšiai endured were organized by a local military doctor who spoke Yiddish well and whose beard made him appear to be Jewish.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> The document was found in the Edvardas Turauskas Papers, Hoover Institution Library, Box 5, “Lietuvai išlaisvinti nurodymai,” 24 March 1941, 11, and is posted at <https://www.ekspertai.eu/static/uploads/2014/01/Lietuvai%20islaisvinti%20nurodymai.pdf>. A copy of the document was also reprinted in “The Preconditions for the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism in Lithuania, Second Half of the 19th Century–June 1941,” by Liudas Truska and Vytautas Vareikis, vol. 1, *The Crimes of the Totalitarian Regimes in Lithuania: The Nazi Occupation* (Vilnius, Lithuania: Margi Raštai, 2004), 245.

<sup>65</sup> “Lithuanian Collaboration during the Second World War,” Prof. Saulius Suziedėlis “Kollaboration” in *Nordosteuropa. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Ed. Joachim Tauber (Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts, 1; Wiesbaden 2006) (“Lithuanian Collaboration”), p. 151, posted on the YIVO website at [https://yivo.org/cimages/suziedelis\\_collaborators.pdf](https://yivo.org/cimages/suziedelis_collaborators.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> This violence was urged, for example, by the LAF daily publication, *I laisvę (Toward Freedom)*. The June 26 edition urged readers to persecute the Jews on the pretext that the Jews had been calling for the enslavement of Germany. “Lithuania,” *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-occupied Soviet Territories* (Ed.: Joshua Rubenstein, et al.) (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009), p. 281. The same day, the Lithuanians also accused the Jews of shooting at German soldiers. “Holocaust and Musar for the Telšiai Yeshivah: Avraham Yitshak and Eliyahu Meir Bloch,” by Gershon Greenberg, *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, Edited by Alvydas Nikžentaitis, et al., (Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2004) (“Greenberg”), pp. 233. The next day, June 27, is remembered as Telšiai’s “Friday of Terror.” The day began with all of the Jews being marched from the main square to the edge of Lake Mastis, where the Lithuanians told them that the Jews were responsible for the murder of 72 Lithuanian political prisoners by the Soviet authorities, which occurred just before the Soviets fled east. Thirty Jewish men were then ordered to exhume the corpses with their bare hands, wash the corpses, kiss them and lick their decayed wounds, and reinter the bodies. Telz-Rosin, p. 533, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html); “The Slaughter Of Jews In The Lithuanian County Seat Telzh (Telshiai),” Koniuchowsky, pp. 23; USHMM Encyclopedia, p. 1131.

<sup>67</sup> *The Truth and Nothing But The Truth: Jewish Resistance in Lithuania*, by Aleks Faitelson (Geden Publishing House, Jerusalem and New York, 2006), p. 458.

<sup>68</sup> “The Slaughter Of Jews In The Lithuanian County Seat Telzh (Telshiai),” Koniuchowsky, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Rabbi Oshry (1914–2003) was born in Kupiškis and was a prominent scholar at the Slabodka yeshiva in Vilijampolė. During the war he was a slave laborer in the Kovna Ghetto. He survived and was liberated. After the war he lived in New York, where he was recognized as a “posek,” a person who was asked to resolve very complicated questions of Jewish law. Before the war he knew nearly all of the leading rabbis in Lithuania. After the war, he interviewed many of the survivors, including those from Telšiai. His 1951 Yiddish-language book, *Churbn Lita (the Lithuanian Holocaust)*, is considered one of many reference works on the Holocaust in Kaunas and provincial Lithuania. His Yiddish-language article “Telz” in that book was reprinted in *The Telshe Book*. In 1995 an English translation of *Churbn Lita* was published under the title, *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, English translation by Y. Leiman (The Judaica Press, Inc., Brooklyn, New York, 1995) (“Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry”).

<sup>70</sup> “Telz,” *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, p. 261. Upon information and belief, LAF Major Alfonsas Svilas was given command of Telšiai; and regional leader Jonas Noreika, who was then based in Plungė, visited Svilas in Telšiai

On July 14, 1941, several hundred Jewish men were murdered but a heavy rainstorm interrupted any further shooting. The next day, several hundred more men, including the heads of the yeshiva and yeshiva students, were taken to place where mass graves had already been dug. Before they were killed, however, they endured hours of torture. They were then marched to the area where they would be shot and buried. LAF regional commander Jonas Noreika's deputy in Telšiai, Bronius Juodikis, was the town's chief of police. Upon information and belief, he commanded the killings, leading a team of about 50 Lithuanian "activists" and 8 German security policemen.<sup>71</sup> Within six months all of the remaining women and children of Telšiai were also murdered.<sup>72</sup>

The Jewish women and children of Telšiai were taken to Geruliai, where they were kept with thousands of other Jews from the surrounding area. On August 30, 1941, all of these prisoners were taken out and shot, with the exception of about 500, primarily young women.<sup>73</sup> These survivors were transferred to a "ghetto" in a designated part of Telšiai near the bank of the lake. It is believed that among the 500 spared were the wife of Rabbi A.Y. Bloch, their two daughters, and their four-year-old son. The "ghetto" was "liquidated" on December 24, 1941,<sup>74</sup> when the surviving captives were killed.

\* \* \*

*The Telshe Book* was published in 1984 as a lasting memorial to the legendary Jewish community of Telšiai.

### III. The History and Legacy of the Telshe Yeshiva

In 1875 the Telshe Yeshiva was founded as a school for local Jewish students by three Talmudic scholars, Rabbi Me'ir Atlas, Rabbi Ya'akov Oppenheim, and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Abel. They were advocates of the Vilna Ga'on's educational principles. From this humble start, the yeshiva expanded the scope of Jewish education among Litvaks. Its approach to teaching and innovations are to this day known as the "Lithuanian model" used by rabbinical colleges throughout the world.

#### A. The Impact of the Khmelnitzki Uprising On Orthodox Jewish Faith

Following the Khmelnitzki Uprising (1648-1657), which killed thousands of Jews and destroyed many centers of Jewish life and learning in the Ukraine, many Jews became disheartened

---

on June 24, 1941. The Germans arrived on June 25. *USHMM Encyclopedia*, pp. 1131–1132, and Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre Archive. Kazio Šilgalio byla. 12.17.Š-135.

<sup>71</sup> "Žydų likimas Telšių valsčiaus mažuosiuose getuose," by Aleksandras Vitkus and Chaimas Bargmanas, *Genocidas ir Rezistencija*, Ed. Arūnas Bubnys (Lietuvos Gyventojų Genocido ir Rezistencijos Tyrimo Centras, Vilnius, 2013 2 (34), p. 100-115, <http://genocid.lt/centras/lt/1923/a/> (summary); Greenberg, pp. 223-260.

<sup>72</sup> "Telz," *The Telshe Book*, p. 19, English translation by Ralph Salinger, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html>.

<sup>73</sup> There are many detailed accounts of the systematic robbery, torture, cruelty, and murder of the Jews of Telšiai, including: (1) "The Slaughter Of Jews In The Lithuanian County Seat Telzh (Telshiai)" and "The Slaughter Of Jews In The Lithuanian Town of Rietavas," Koniuchowsky, pp. 22-50; (2) "Telz," *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, Translated by Y. Leiman from the Yiddish book *Churbin Lita* (The Judaica Press, Inc., Brooklyn, New York, 1995), pp. 257-265, (Note: Rabbi Oshry's original Yiddish text of this chapter appears in *The Telshe Book*, pp. 51 to 53; (3) Greenberg, p. 254; and (4) "What happened in Telshyay to the entire Jewish population of Zhmud," *The Unknown Black Book*, *supra*, pp. 301-308. The names of many of the Telšiai men, women, and children of who were killed are recorded in *The Telshe Book* at pages 474 to 504, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel474.html>. On the Hebrew calendar, the men were killed on Tammuz 19 and 20 of the year 5701 and most of the women were killed on Elul 7, 5702. These are the memorial days for the victims.

<sup>74</sup> The corresponding date on the Hebrew calendar is Teves 6, 5702. Alsėdžiai, p. 7.

and believed the time was right for the appearance of the Messiah,<sup>75</sup> a descendant of King David who will resurrect the dead; establish justice, freedom, and peace throughout the world; and bring Jews back to the Land of Israel.

In 1648, a 22-year-old rabbi from Smyrna (today, İzmir, Turkey) named Shabtai Tzvi declared that he was the Messiah. He also said that he had authority to change various religious practices. The possibility of the arrival of a “messianic” age instilled great hope and he attracted thousands of followers, who became known as “Sabbateans.” In 1666, the Sultan of the Ottoman Turks, Medmed IV, had Tzvi arrested and gave him the choice of martyrdom or conversion to Islam. Tzvi converted.

Tzvi’s apostasy compounded the feelings of despair among Jews who lived in the Commonwealth, most particularly those who lived closest to the Ukraine. The messianic hopes of most Jews, however, continued. In the early 1700s, a new wave of Jewish mysticism began, under the influence of Rabbi Israel Ben Eli’ezer (1698-1760). Rabbi Israel earned a reputation as a “ba’al shem” (a “master of the name”), a folk healer who could use mysticism, amulets, and incantations to invoke the name of God. By the 1740s Rabbi Israel “the Ba’al Shem” was recommending changes to Jewish tradition, with greater emphasis on spiritual religious experiences and less emphasis upon specific practices that had been ordained by rabbis over the centuries.

Many Jews were drawn to Rabbi Israel’s approach to Judaism, particularly Jews in the communities in the Ukraine and Galicia. Various charismatic rabbis established “schools” based upon Rabbi Israel’s views and practices. Collectively, these “schools” are known today as the Chasidic Movement. They, in turn, came to refer to Rabbi Israel as the “Ba’al Shem Tov” – the Master of the Good Name.”

Around the same time, another religious-revival movement was founded by Jacob Joseph Frank (1726-1791), who claimed to be the reincarnation of the apostate Shabtai Tzvi and formulated a religious sect that incorporated elements of Christianity.

## **B. The Reaction of the Vilna Ga’on To Chasidism**

The traditional Lithuanian Jewish community sought to stop the spread of the Chasidic and Frankist movements. They approached and won the support of the legendary Orthodox scholar in Vilna / Vilnius, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman Kremer (1720-1797), who has come to be known as the Vilna Ga’on.

---

<sup>75</sup> From the Hebrew word Moshi’ach משיח, which means the “anointed one.”



6. Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman Kremer (1720-1797), the Vilna Ga'on.

Rabbi Elijah believed that the very life of Judaism is the study of the Bible and rabbinic teachings and that such study must be conducted in a scientific manner.<sup>76</sup> He emphasized studying Hebrew grammar and secular sciences. In fact, he even translated books on geometry into Yiddish and Hebrew. Despite his extraordinary achievements in mastering Jewish law, he led a simple, ascetic life. He neither held office nor served as a communal rabbi, judge, or head of a rabbinical academy.

Rabbi Elijah also placed great emphasis on the perfection of character. Since purity of heart and moral perfection were inconsistent with a pleasure-seeking life, he recommended frugality and a cheerful acceptance of suffering, with the joy and spiritual excitement of study and of worship being a sufficient reward.<sup>77</sup> This approach to life was expressed in the body of “mussar” Judaic literature.

At the risk of over-simplification, mussar looks for the spiritual essence of a thing. For example, a religious rule might require a certain action, but it is not enough to perform that action. One must understand why the action is required and integrate that understanding into one's life. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant / Salantai would transform this concept from the individual to community practices, which today is known as the “Mussar Movement.” As noted below, in the 1880s Rabbi Israel of Salant personally chose one of his best students, Rabbi Eli'ezer Gordon, to be the rabbi of Telšiai and the “Rosh” (head) of the Telshe Yeshiva.

Rabbi Elijah objected to the formation of Chasidic “courts” around charismatic figures who tended to require “blind obedience from their followers, who venerated them and sought their advice and help in all matters spiritual and material.” Such relationships, in extreme cases, created human intermediaries between a Jew and God. Rabbi Elijah was also concerned with the possible influence of the Frankists.<sup>78</sup>

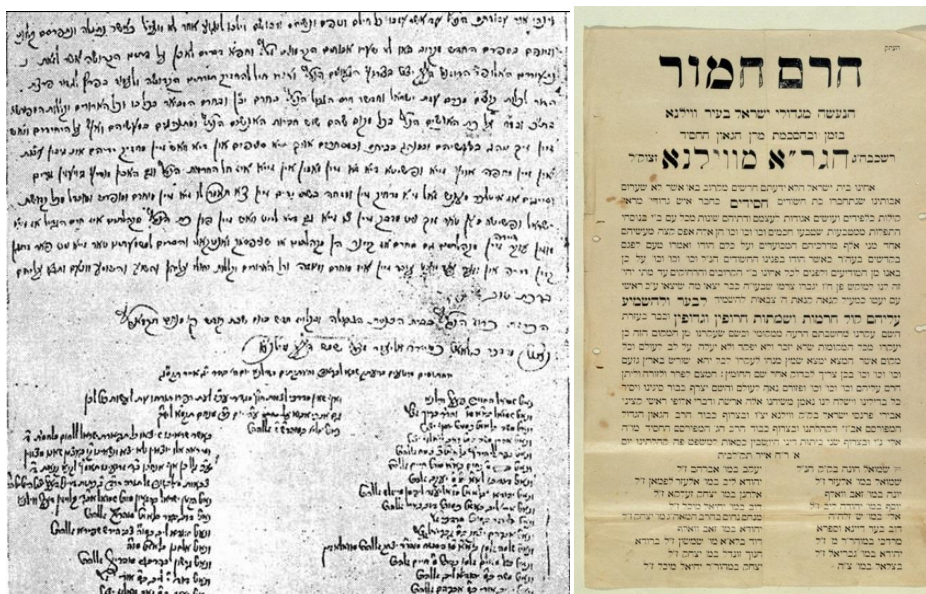
When the influence of the Chasidic Movement began to be felt in Vilna, Rabbi Elijah added his name to letters of excommunication issued by leaders of the Misnagdim (“Opponents” of

<sup>76</sup> YIVO, the Jewish or Yiddish Scientific Institute (“Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut, אינסטיטוט וויסנשאַפֿטלעכער אינסטיטוט”), was established in Vilnius / Vilna / Wilno in 1925 to study, preserve, and teach the cultural history of Jewish life throughout Eastern Europe. In a sense it used Rabbi Elijah's “Litvak” approach of gaining a comprehensive understanding of subjects by examining them from all perspectives.

<sup>77</sup> Greenbaum, p. 84; Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth, by Immanuel Etkes, English Translation (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>78</sup> Greenbaum, p. 85.

Chasidism).<sup>79</sup> Except for this foray into the conflict with Chasidism, the Ga'on took no part in public affairs.



7. Left: Writ of excommunication of Chasidim, signed by the Vilna Ga'on and other community officials August 1781. Right: 19<sup>th</sup> Century copy of a writ of excommunication issued against the Chasidim confirmed by the Vilna Ga'on, Vilna, Lithuania, 1772. Source: Beit HaTfutsot / The Museum of the Jewish People, <https://dbs.bh.org.il/image/writ-of-excommunication-issued-against-the-hasidim-confirmed-by-the-vilna-gaon-vilna-lithuania-1772>.

### C. The Volozhin Yeshiva (1802-1892) and Rabbi Israel Salanter

The Vilna Ga'on did not have a yeshiva. However, he encouraged his chief pupil, Rabbi Chaim ben Yitzchok of Volozhin (1749-1821), also known as “Rabbi Chaim Volozhin,” to establish a yeshiva that would emphasize the Ga'on's scientific study of rabbinic literature. In 1802, five year after the death of the Ga'on, Rabbi Chaim opened a yeshiva in his native town of Volozhin and revolutionized Torah study.



8. In Hebrew script: “The yeshiva in Volozhin”

The Volozhin Yeshiva trained generations of scholars, rabbis, and leaders using the Vilna Ga'on's study method of using a penetrating analysis of the Talmudic text and Hebrew grammar to understand the meaning and intent of commentaries on Jewish law and to teach the ethical principles of “mussar” literature.

The yeshiva was also influenced by the “Haskalah” – the Jewish “Enlightenment” intellectual movement – which sought to preserve Jewish religious, moral, and cultural values, including reviving

<sup>79</sup> Greenbaum, pp. 85-87. To this day, in some Chasidic circles, the terms “Litvak” and “misnagid” are interchangeable. See, e.g., Shapiro, pp. 104 and 270, and Greenbaum, p. 85.

Hebrew for secular purposes, while integrating ideals of the Western Enlightenment such as rationalism, freedom of thought, and the study of contemporary subjects. Rabbi Chaim revised the traditional curriculum for yeshivas by including secular subjects. This approach was adopted by the yeshivas in Mir, Slobodke / Viliampolè, Ponevish / Panevėžys, Kelm / Kelmė, and Telshe / Telšiai.

Rabbi Yosef Zundel of Salant / Salantai (1786-1866), who had been a student of the Vilna Ga'on, also studied under Rabbi Chaim at the Volozhin Yeshiva. Like the Vilna Ga'on, Rabbi Yosef Zundel immersed himself in the study of Jewish law and mussar literature. Rabbi Yosef Zundel's most famous student was Rabbi Israel Lipkin, who became known as Rabbi Israel of Salant – Rabbi Israel "Salanter."

Rabbi Israel Lipkin (1809-1883) was the son of Rabbi Zev-Wolf Lipkin. Rabbi Zev-Wolf (1788-1858), a native of Žagarė and a great scholar, served as the rabbi of Telšiai from 1835 until his death in 1858.<sup>80</sup> His son, Rabbi Israel, was also born in Žagarė but received most of his education from Rabbi Yosef Zundel in Salantai. In those teachings, Rabbi Yosef Zundel stressed the importance of religious self-improvement – mussar. With this foundation, which had its intellectual roots in the teachings of the Vilna Ga'on, Rabbi Israel "Salanter" developed a method of instruction that became the basis of the Mussar Movement.

In 1892, the Russian government imposed harsh restrictions on yeshivas in an attempt to force them to teach secular studies. The Volozhin Yeshiva could not realistically meet these demands and was forced to close.

Many of the Volozhin students sought to transfer to the Telshe Yeshiva, where one of Rabbi Israel Salanter's brightest students, Rabbi Eli'ezer Gordon, was the "Rosh" (head).<sup>81</sup> This combination of events had a profound consequence: After the Volozhin yeshiva closed, the Telshe Yeshiva was recognized as one of the great yeshivas.<sup>82</sup>

#### **D. The History of the Telshe Yeshiva, 1875-1940**

In 1882, Rabbi Israel Salanter chose Rabbi Eli'ezer Gordon (1840-1910) to be Telšiai's official rabbi. Two years later, in 1884, Rabbi Israel appointed Rabbi Gordon to serve as the "Rosh" of the Telshe Yeshiva.<sup>83</sup>

Rabbi Gordon's reputation as a scholar and educator attracted highly capable teachers and students to the yeshiva. By 1900, the Telshe Yeshiva had 400 enrolled students and was considered one of the greatest yeshivas in the world.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Cohen, *The Telshe Book*, p. 38, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel034.html#f034\\_4](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel034.html#f034_4).

<sup>81</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 63, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 59, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 57, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 24, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.



9. Left: Rabbi Eli'ezer Gordon (1841-1910); Center: Rabbi Shim'on Shkop (1860-1939); Right: Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch (1860-1929)

The Telshe Yeshiva was established in 1875 with the modest objective of being a Torah-oriented school for young people in Telsiai.<sup>85</sup> Within 25 years it became one of the world's leading yeshivas, and remained so until 1940. The yeshiva's rise to prominence was due to its two innovative leaders, the aforementioned, Rabbi Eli'ezer Gordon (1840-1910), who was the "Rosh" (head) until 1910, and his successor, Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch (1860-1930), who led the yeshiva from 1910 until 1929.

Rabbi Gordon made several innovations in Jewish education that are universal today. First, he divided the student body into five classes, with each class based upon the students' proficiency in Talmud study. Advancement depended upon a student showing proficiency in an annual examination. Second, he defined the school year clearly and the schedule was strictly followed. Both of these changes created a sense of order. In addition, he required that lectures be given on topics, rather than just studying specific texts.

The Telshe Yeshiva also adopted high academic standards. To be accepted into the yeshiva, an applicant needed a rabbinic letter of recommendation, a detailed personal *curriculum vitae*, and a written invitation from the yeshiva's management.<sup>86</sup>



10. The Main Telshe Yeshiva Building

<sup>85</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 57, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 63, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

Generally speaking, there were two categories of classes. In all the lectures on Jewish law, the students had “full academic freedom” to debate with a lecturer and each other.<sup>87</sup> In lectures on mussar, which pertained to principles of the Torah, the faith, and ethics, there were no arguments or debates.

There was a fixed schedule from 08:00 until 21:30 for meals, prayers, lectures, and independent study. However, some students would study late into the night and even through the night. The students received a modest subsidy for living expenses but could also be fined for failure to strictly observe the prescribed schedule.<sup>88</sup>

In 1884 Rabbi Gordon appointed Rabbi Shim'on Yehuda Shkop (1860-1939) to serve as the head of the yeshiva's “mesivta” (high school for boys). Rabbi Shkop was the brother-in-law of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Abel, one of the co-founders of the Telshe yeshiva, and he had studied at the Volozhin yeshiva, where he stood out as a brilliant student. Rabbi Shkop's principal teacher at Volozhin, Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik, had developed an analytic method that considered a given subject from all perspectives. At the Telshe Yeshiva Rabbi Shkop became a renowned lecturer who attracted many students. Rabbi Shkop also refined Rabbi Soloveichik's analytic approach, integrating understanding and logic. He taught at the yeshiva until 1901.

Another prominent teacher was Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch (1860-1929). Rabbi Y.L. Bloch, a native of Raseiniai, was a student of Rabbi Gordon and had married Rabbi Gordon's daughter. Rabbi Y.L. Bloch was an expert in Jewish mysticism. Collectively, Rabbis Gordon, Bloch, Shkop, and other leading teachers developed an approach to studying rabbinical literature that integrates understanding and logic. This approach became known as “Telzer Derech” (the “way of the Telshe yeshiva). The approach attempts to understand not only the substance of a thing (“chomer”) but also its spiritual essence (“tzura”). As one writer explains, “The pursuit of tzura underlies the Telzer approach to all areas of Jewish thought and endeavor.”<sup>89</sup>

Rabbi Gordon passed away unexpectedly in 1910. His son-in-law, Rabbi Bloch, had left the yeshiva in the late 1890s but returned in 1910 to assume its leadership. In that role, he continued Rabbi Gordon's efforts to modernize the yeshiva until his own death in 1929.

During the initial period of Lithuania's independence, the Telshe Yeshiva established a series of related institutions which, together, made Telšiai one of the country's three largest centers for Jewish education and attracted students from throughout the world. Within a few years the yeshiva created a complete educational system: A kindergarten, a primary school, a girls' school, a gymnasium [secondary school] for girls, and a women's Hebrew teachers' college.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 60, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 59-61, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>89</sup> “Telshe: 120 Years Since the Founding of the Yeshiva,” by Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer (“Bechhofer”), <http://www.aishdas.org/rygb/telshe.htm>.

<sup>90</sup> “Telz,” *The Telshe Book*, p. 19, English translation by Ralph Salinger, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html>.



11. Members of the third section of the mechina, Purim, 1938. From the “Alka” Samogitian Museum’s collection of photographs from Chaim Kaplanskis’ studio in Telšiai.

In 1920, Rabbi Y.L. Bloch established primary schools for both boys and girls as well as a preparatory school for students hoping to go to the yeshiva (“mechina”). Like the Telshe Yeshiva itself, the preparatory school had levels of classes for student advancement. This innovation is now an accepted norm in yeshiva studies.

In 1921, the yeshiva helped to establish a Hebrew gymnasium for girls.<sup>91</sup> It was the first Orthodox Jewish gymnasium in Lithuania<sup>92</sup> and was famous throughout Lithuania because of its combination of a strong religious education and a high standard of general academic studies. The secular subjects included Lithuanian and other languages, history, mathematics, natural sciences, and gymnastics. The works of Lessing, Schiller, and Shakespeare are examples of the literature studied. This broad curriculum was consistent with the Vilna Ga’on’s view that Torah students must also study the natural world. The school was accredited by the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, and rabbis and Orthodox Jews in Žemaitija (Lithuania’s western, “Lowlands” region) sent their daughters there.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> “Introduction,” by Dov Levin, English translation by Martin Jacobs, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 8-10, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel008.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 27, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>93</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 541, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html); “A monument to Telz, my city,” by Shoshana Holzberg (Shochat), English Translation by Sara Mages, *The Telshe Book*, p. 209-211, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel203.html#Page235>. Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 27, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>;



11. The building of the Yavne Gymnasium for Girls in Telšiai, *The Telshe Book*, p. 210, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel203.html>.



12. Students of the Yavne Gymnasium, YIVO, <https://yivo.org/Lithuanian-Jewish-Girls-Education-in-Telz>.

Around this time, the schools for boys and men also began to offer secular studies. This innovation was to have a significant impact two years later. In 1924, the Lithuanian government announced that a rabbinical college could only be accredited if it had a secular-studies department. The Telshe Yeshiva received such state accreditation.<sup>94</sup>

The yeshiva also established in a nearby building a “kollel,” a post-graduate institute to train yeshiva graduates who wanted to become ordained rabbis. These and other institutions, including a kindergarten, constituted a thorough system of Judaic education that evolved from the Telshe Yeshiva.<sup>95</sup>

Another prominent educator was Rabbi Chaim Shalom Tuvia Rabinowitz (1856-1931). Rabbi Rabinowitz, who was also known as “Reb Chaim Telzer,” moved to the yeshiva to become the “Rosh” of the “mesivta.” He taught at the yeshiva for 26 years and developed a refinement to the “Telzer Derech” in which he would present students with two opposing viewpoints and then tell them how to

<sup>94</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 62, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>95</sup> “Introduction,” by Dov Levin, English translation by Martin Jacobs, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 8-10, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel008.html>.

use their analytical skills and insights to examine each argument point-by-point. This approach to Talmudic analysis was accepted by the yeshiva and won the respect of other rabbinical colleges.<sup>96</sup>

The yeshiva also extended its influence more widely, sending young men from the yeshiva to smaller towns to establish yeshivas there for younger students.<sup>97</sup> From 1928 to 1931, the yeshiva also published a monthly Hebrew-language religious magazine called *Ha-Ne'eman* [*The Faithful*].<sup>98</sup>

During the inter-war period the students themselves organized and operated several committees to help each other. In 1928, a kitchen offering free lunch was opened for students. It was operated entirely by students. There was also a health committee, an editorial committee, and a committee that made interest-free loans to students. Most interestingly, there was a committee that served to negotiate student issues with the yeshiva's administration.<sup>99</sup> When they had free time, the students would make excursions and take hikes outside of town in the local forests; in the summer they enjoyed swimming in the lake or boating in the evening.<sup>100</sup>



13. Left: Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch (1891-1941); Right: Rabbi Elijah Me'ir Bloch (1894-1954), with permission of Baruch Amsel and the Institute For Judaic Culture and History, kevarim.com

An important aspect of the yeshiva's culture is related by Levi Shalit (1916-1994).<sup>101</sup> In an article in the yizkor book for Rokiškis and its Environs, he noted that most of the Jews living in Lithuania's far northeastern corner, "Lithuania's Siberia," were Chasidim, in contrast to the rest of Lithuania's Jews, who were followers of the Vilna Ga'on, the great opponent of Chasidism. A prominent Rokiškis Jew, Pesach Ruch, sent his two sons to the Telshe Yeshiva, rather than to the yeshivas in Slabodka or Ponevitzh / Panevėžys, which were geographically closer to Rokiškis. This

---

<sup>96</sup> Bechhofer.

<sup>97</sup> "Telz," *The Telshe Book*, p. 19, English translation by Ralph Salinger, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsai/tel017.html>.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*; Telz-Rosin, p. 548, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html).

<sup>99</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 63-64, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsai/tel057.html>.

<sup>100</sup> *Id.*

<sup>101</sup> Shalit was a well-known Lithuanian Jewish journalist, author, and publisher who had studied at the Telshe and Slobodka (Vilijampolė) yeshivas. During the Holocaust he was a slave laborer, first in the Šiauliai ghetto and then at Dachau.

was because, of all the yeshivas in Lithuania, the Telshe Yeshiva never questioned a student's personal beliefs. It was singularly focused on the study of Jewish law and mussar – and nothing else.<sup>102</sup>

After Rabbi Y.L. Bloch died, leadership of the yeshiva and of the Telšiai Jewish community passed to Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch (1891-1941), the second son of Rabbi Y.L. Bloch and the grandson of Rabbi Gordon.

During the 1930s, Telšiai had more institutions of Jewish teacher training than any other town in inter-war Lithuania.<sup>103</sup> The total number of students in all programs exceeded 400, and they were drawn from many European countries, as well as from the United States.<sup>104</sup> At the center of the vibrant Jewish life of Telšiai was the yeshiva, which made the city “a metropolis of Torah for the entire Jewish world.”<sup>105</sup> As noted previously, those who were educated there went on to teach Jewish law and Hebrew in Jewish communities throughout Lithuania and the world.<sup>106</sup>

## E. The Destruction of Telshe Yeshiva

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied the western half of Poland. On September 17, 1939, Soviet Russia seized the eastern half. In October, Stalin offered independent Lithuania a Faustian bargain: Stalin would transfer to Lithuania the Vilnius region if the Soviets could place their forces on Lithuanian territory. Lithuania accepted the arrangement. In June 1940, however, the Soviets used the presence of their military to coerce Lithuania to surrender its independence.

In short order, the Russians transformed Lithuania into a Soviet state. All private Jewish organizations were disbanded and all Jewish religious schools were closed.<sup>107</sup> As the historian Alfred Erich Senn observed, under the new Soviet regime, Jews lost Saturday as their publicly recognized holy day, Jews were encouraged to speak their secular language, Yiddish, and not Hebrew (the language of the Jewish religion), religious organizations were banned, and all societies dedicated to a Jewish national homeland were dissolved.<sup>108</sup>

Initially, the yeshiva was permitted to operate as before. After three months, however, the Soviets seized the buildings. At first, the Red Army used the yeshiva's main building as a barracks. Later, the building was converted into a hospital. The mechina's building was re-purposed into a school to train artisans.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> “The Peculiarity of Rakishok in Jewish Lithuania,” by Levi Shalit, Translated by Bella Golubchik, *Memorial Book of Rokiskis* [Translated from the yizkor book for Rokiškis and its Environs], p. 43, <https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/rokiskis/rok043.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 27, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>104</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel Poliakoff (1914-2011), a native of Baltimore, Maryland, attended the Telshe Yeshiva from 1930 to 1939. Rabbi Poliakoff's grandfather, Rabbi Abraham Nachman Schwartz (1871-1937), a native of Shidlove / Šiluva, had attended the Telshe Yeshiva before emigrating to the United States in 1905. Rabbi Schwartz founded Baltimore's Talmudical Academy and became the chief rabbi of Baltimore's Orthodox Jewish community. In 2009, Rabbi Poliakoff published *Minhagei Lita: Customs of Lithuanian Jewry*, which focused on the religious practices and ethical values of Lithuanian Jews that he had learned at the Telshe Yeshiva, <https://www.litvaks.org/projects/minhagei-lita-customs-of-lithuanian-jewry/>.

<sup>105</sup> Horovitz, *The Telshe Book*, p. 17, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>106</sup> Natanowitz Telšiai History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 27, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html#Page21>.

<sup>107</sup> Horovitz, *The Telshe Book*, p. 17, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel017.html>.

<sup>108</sup> *Lithuania 1940*, p. 202.

<sup>109</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 65. <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

The yeshiva's 380 students<sup>110</sup> had lived in local rented accommodations. Soon after the Soviet takeover, the new authorities forbade them from renting rooms in Telšiai. Rabbi A.Y. Bloch then dispersed the students among five surrounding towns, including Tryškiai, Šiluva, Tauragė, and Vilkija,<sup>111</sup> and arranged for the faculty to travel from town to town to deliver classes.



14. Rabbi Dr. Bernard (Dov) Revel (1885-1940), a former student at the Telshe Yeshiva, became the President of Yeshiva University in New York.

In 1940, two of the yeshiva's leaders, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz (1894-1965), the dean of the kollel (the post-graduate program), and Rabbi Eliyahu Me'ir Bloch (1894-1955), the brother of Rabbi A.Y. Bloch and the director of the Yavneh women's teachers' school, worked to secure visas and asylum for scholars at the Telshe Yeshiva, which was recognized by the United States government as an accredited institution of higher education. They received help from Rabbi Dr. Bernard (Dov) Revel, the president of Yeshiva University in New York, who had studied at Telshe Yeshiva in his youth.<sup>112</sup> On September 4, 1940, Rabbis Katz and E.M. Bloch set out for America to seek donations and discuss the possibility of relocating the yeshiva to another country.<sup>113</sup> They traveled with a small group of yeshiva students through Russia and Japan to Seattle, arriving on November 9, 1940.<sup>114</sup>

In October 1940 a group of students, led by Rabbi Chaim Stein (1913-2011), who held visas from the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara traveled through Russia to the Far East and made their

---

<sup>110</sup> *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, by Moshe D. Sherman, Editor: Marc Lee Raphael (Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1996) ("Sherman"), p. 32; Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 64.

<sup>111</sup> Elul 1, 5702, Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 65, <https://www.jewishgen.otrg/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Helmreich, p. 39; Greenberg, p. 254, Note 45; Rabbi Revel, a scholar and educational administrator, was born in Pren / Prienai in 1885. He had studied at the Telshe Yeshiva under the Rosh, Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch. Revel was ordained as a rabbi in 1901 (at the age of 16) and was imprisoned by the czarist authorities in 1905. Upon his release, in 1906, he emigrated to the United States. In 1911 he was awarded a doctorate of philosophy; his thesis was on the subject of Karaite Jewish law. In 1915 he was appointed president of Yeshiva University, a position he held until his death in December 1940. In 1986, the United States issued a \$1 postage stamp in his honor as part of its Great Americans Series.

<sup>113</sup> Natanowitz Yeshiva History, *The Telshe Book*, p. 65, <https://www.jewishgen.otrg/yizkor/Telsiai/tel057.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Sherman, p. 32; *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry*, by William B. Helmreich (Ktav Publishing House, Brooklyn, 2000) ("Helmreich"), p. 39.

way to Brisbane, Australia.<sup>115</sup> In early 1941 they reached the United States, where they reunited with Rabbi E.M. Bloch and Rabbi Katz. These refugee educators and students eventually settled in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>116</sup>

After Nazi Germany invaded Lithuania, on June 22, 1941, local Lithuanians arrested, tortured, and murdered the Jews of Telšiai. On July 14 and 15, the men were killed, including Rabbi A.Y. Bloch, the head of the Yeshiva, and the male faculty and students. Later in 1941, the women and children were killed,<sup>117</sup> including the families of Rabbis E.M. Bloch and Katz, who had gone to the United States in the Fall of 1940.

Thus, by the end of 1941, all of the Jews of Telšiai were murdered and, with them, Telšiai's status as one of the world's pre-eminent centers of Jewish education was destroyed.

## **F. The Continuing Legacy of the Telshe Yeshiva**

Although the Soviets closed the Telshe Yeshiva in 1940, and nearly all of the yeshiva's teachers and students were brutally murdered in 1941, the yeshiva's educational methods continue to live.

Berl Cohen provides a long list of rabbis who studied at the Telshe Yeshiva with the following observation, "If one wishes to have an idea of the religious-spiritual influence of the Telz Yeshiva on the Jewish life over the world, it is enough to glance at the following random list of rabbis who studied there and later – most of them – spread the 'Telz spirit' throughout hundreds of Jewish communities over the world."<sup>118</sup>

During the Second World War, the primary center of Jewish education shifted to America, where the Telshe model continues to be a force. As noted by Josef Rosin, "Rabbi Eliezer Gordon and Rabbi Shimon Shkop determined the specific Telz system of instruction, which was accepted in most Yeshivoth of America, where many of their heads were of Lithuanian origin."<sup>119</sup>

Rabbis Chaim Mordecai Katz and Eliyahu Me'ir Bloch, the two Telshe Yeshiva teachers who had reached the United States in the Fall of 1940, opened a new yeshiva in Cleveland on October 28, 1941.<sup>120</sup> It was founded upon the educational principles developed in Telšiai and was named the Telshe Yeshiva of Cleveland in honor of its Lithuanian predecessor. In 1943, Rabbis Katz and Bloch established a Jewish day school, the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland. A year later they opened a mechina with three departments. In 1947, a Hebrew school for girls in Cleveland was added, which was called Yavneh, the same name that was given to the girls' high school in Telšiai.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>115</sup> "Rabbi Chaim Stein of Cleveland's Telshe Yeshiva dies," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, June 30, 2011, <https://www.jta.org/2011/06/30/lifestyle/rabbi-chaim-stein-of-clevelands-telshe-yeshiva-dies>.

<sup>116</sup> "Telshe Yeshiva" *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telshe\\_Yeshiva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telshe_Yeshiva) (accessed May 26, 2020).

<sup>117</sup> As noted previously, the names of many of the victims appear on page 474 to 504 of *The Telshe Book*, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel474.html>, and many of the details are presented in Rabbi Oshry's article "Telz," in *The Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry*, pp. 257-265, which is an English translation of Rabbi Oshry's original Yiddish text in *The Telshe Book*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>118</sup> Cohen, *The Telshe Book*, p. 43, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel034.html>. See, for example, "History of the Yeshivah," *Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg Website*, <http://ygi.co.za/history/> (accessed June 2, 2020).

<sup>119</sup> Telz-Rosin, p. 535, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4\\_531.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lithuania4/lit4_531.html).

<sup>120</sup> Helmreich, p. 39.

## “The Yavne of Lithuania”

In the year 68 C.E., during the Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire, the army of Roman general Vespasian was besieging the holy city of Jerusalem. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the most distinguished disciple of Rabbi Hillel, was a well-respected teacher in the city. He contrived a meeting with Vespasian and asked for permission to establish a school in the small town of Yavne<sup>121</sup> when the war ended. The general, who soon became the emperor of Rome, agreed. The academy at Yavne became the center of Jewish education and rabbinic authority for centuries, continuing the development of traditional Judaism. Rabbi Yochanan is rightly remembered as the “father of wisdom and the father of generations (of scholars).”<sup>122</sup>

In his introduction to *The Telshe Book*, Kaunas native Prof. Dov Levin writes that the book is a “glorious monument to a glorious community which was the innermost heart of religious Jewry in Lithuania between the two world wars. If we can make a comparison, we could say that just as Jewish Lithuania is called the Land of Israel of the Exile and Vilna the Jerusalem of Lithuania, we might just possibly call the Telz community the Yavne of Lithuania.”<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

In the long annals of the history of the Jewish people, few periods are as prominent as the years when Jews lived in “Litva,” the lands of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, which today are largely in Lithuania and Belarus. This era was one of great cultural, intellectual, and spiritual growth, and it was strongly influenced by the teaching principles and personal example of the humble scholar who came to be known as the Vilna Ga’on. During this period, the Telšiai Jewish community was typical of similar communities in provincial Lithuania but it also fostered the Telshe Yeshiva, which developed a model of progressive Jewish education which is followed by Jewish communities worldwide today.

Jews associate several years in history with the end of epochs. The year 70 C.E. is remembered as the year that the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The year 1492 is remembered as the year when the Jews (and Muslims) of Spain were expelled, thereby ending a “golden age” of Jewish culture when Jews, Muslims, and Christians not only lived in harmony in Spain but contributed to the world’s intellectual and cultural growth. The year 1941 will similarly be remembered forever as the year that Jewish life in Lithuania ceased to exist. That civilization lives on, however, in the beliefs, practices, and memory of the hundreds of thousands of descendants of Litvaks who now live around the world.

---

<sup>121</sup> Yavne is southwest of Rechovot, Israel, about four kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea.

<sup>122</sup> “Yochanan ben Zakkai,” Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/yochanan-ben-zakkai> (accessed May 18, 2020).

<sup>123</sup> “Introduction,” by Dov Levin, English translation by Martin Jacobs, *The Telshe Book*, pp. 8-10, <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Telsiai/tel008.html>.