



Jewish Heritage in Vilnius

Many famous Judaism scholars and rabbis lived and worked in Vilnius; that is why over the 700 years of their presence in Lithuania Jews created a rich and diverse culture. Vilnius was called the Jerusalem of the North.

1. Lithuanian Jewish Community (Pylimo St. 4) Ph. +370 5 261 3003

The construction of this building at the turn of the 19th century was funded by architect T. Rostvorovskis. It used to be occupied by the Tarbut Gymnasium (the former J. Einstein Gymnasium). The Lithuanian Jewish Community, which re-established itself in 1989, unites all Jewish organisations in the country. There are around 5,000 Jews living in Lithuania. The community organises cultural, educational and religious events; it takes care of the Jewish cultural and historical heritage, and devotes much time to fighting anti-Semitism and promoting the Yiddish language. Community life is full of various events, exhibitions, concerts and Jewish celebrations.

2. Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum (Pamėnkalnio St. 12) Ph. +370 5 262 0730, opening hours of the Holocaust Exposition: I–IV 9.00–17.00, V 9.00–16.00, VII 10.00–16.00

The museum acquired its name in 1997, in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the death of the Vilna Gaon. Near the museum there is a monument to a Righteous Man, the Dutch Ambassador to Lithuania Jan Zvartendijk, who in 1940 granted around 2,200 visas to Jews on the island of Curaçao and thus saved their lives. Next to it there is another monument to a Righteous Man, Sempo Sugihara, Japanese Consul in Lithuania between 1939 and 1940, who issued over 6000 transit visas to Jews in 1940.

3. Former House of the Board of Rabbis (Corner of Šv. Ignoto and Benediktinų St.)

The Supreme Board of Rabbis of the Vilnius Great Synagogue, which was recognised as one of the supreme authorities of the community, used to operate in this building. In 1903, representatives of the Jewish Community met with the patriarch of the Jewish national movement (Zionism) Theodor Herzl in one of its halls. This occasion is marked by a memorial plaque.

4. Vilnius University (Universiteto St. 3) Ph. +370 5 268 7298, open: I–VI 9.00–18.00

The Centre of Non-state Languages (the former Centre for Judaism Studies) of Vilnius University is active in the sphere of preservation and dissemination of Jewish heritage. There is also the Yiddish Institute, in which the Yiddish language is taught and Yiddish literature is fostered. The Department of Yiddish Language and Literature was established at the end of 1940, but only survived until the beginning of the war in Lithuania. The Head of the Department, Docent Noach Priłutski managed to publish a book on the history of the Jewish theatre and he prepared and conducted several courses on the Yiddish language and culture. Over the years of the war, many university professors and employees helped in the efforts to save Jews. One of the most prominent saviours was Ona Šimaitė, librarian and publicist, for

whom a memorial plaque has been installed in the library courtyard. Between 1866 and 1915, the famous art school of I.P. Trutnev was located in the premises of the University. Many artists and sculptors who later earned world recognition studied in this school, including Jacques Lipchitz, Naum Aronson, Chaim Soutine.

5. Small Ghetto (1941)

With Jews gradually settling in Vilnius, their living quarters were taking shape. During the years of Nazi occupation, the Small Ghetto was created in the quarters (Stiklių, Gaono, M. Antokolskio, Žydų Streets) and around 11,000 Jews were herded into it. The Small Ghetto was eliminated on 21 October 1941 and all the Jews who lived there were killed. The crossing point of Stiklių, Gaono, M. Antokolskio and Žydų streets is the core of the Jewish quarter and was home to the glass market that used to be there in the 17th and 18th centuries as well as the numerous gabbling Jewish merchants and the abundance of various goods on sale. A famous sculptor of Jewish descent M. Antokolski was born and lived in the house at 25 Didžioji St.



6. Former Great Synagogue (Žydų St. 5)

The Great Vilnius Synagogue—the main spiritual and cultural centre of the Lithuanian Jews—existed from the end of the 16th century until the Holocaust. As of 1573, the Jewish community in Vilnius had a right to have its own house of worship; however, the first temple was made of wood and was subject to various limitations. In 1633, King Vladislovas Vaza (Władysław Vasa) granted the privilege for construction of a stone synagogue in the Jewish quarters; however the limitations were not lifted. In its size and splendour, the synagogue surpassed all other synagogues built at that time; it could accommodate several thousand people. Later, the synagogue was damaged during the wars and fires. During World War II it was severely damaged. The Soviet authorities destroyed the Great Vilnius Synagogue, an architectural monument of global significance.

7. Monument to the Vilna Gaon (Žydų St. 5)

The name of Vilna Gaon Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720–1797)—one of the most prominent Jewish sages and a world-famous Torah and Talmud analyst—put Vilnius on the map as the Jerusalem of Lithuania. His

former house is marked with a memorial plaque and a monument in his honour (created by Kazimieras Valaitis) can be found near the house.

8. Big Ghetto (1941–1943)

The Big Ghetto of Vilnius existed from 6 September 1941 to 23 September 1943 (Lydos, Rūdninkų, Mėšinių, Ašmenos, Žemaitijos, Dysnos, Šiaulių, Ligoninės Streets). There were around 29,000 Jews in the Big Ghetto; most of them were killed in Paneriai. 18 Rūdninkų St. marks the place of the main entrance into the Big Ghetto; this is indicated in a memorial plaque bearing the plan of the ghetto. The quarter between Ašmenos, Dysnos and Mėšinių Streets is the first quarter of historical Vilnius to be under reconstruction. At present, the Jewish Culture and Information Centre is operating here. Between 1921 and 1951, the present Žemaitijos Street was named after M. Strashun. The books collected by Matityahu Strashun laid the basis for the largest Judaism library in Europe, which was established in Vilnius in 1892. The library itself was destroyed together with the Great Synagogue. Following the restoration of Lithuania's independence, the day of elimination of the Big Ghetto of Vilnius (23 September) was declared the Day of the Jewish Genocide in Lithuania.

9. Monument to Tsemakh Shabad (Rūdninkų St.)

Tsemakh Shabad was a legendary personality. The doctor was active in various spheres of life, including charity (he was one of the heads of the community for supporting refugees), health care (as founder of the Ozė health community in Vilnius), education and science (as an active figure in the Central Jewish Schools Organisation and one of the initiators of the establishment of YIVO), public affairs (together with J. Vygodskij he re-established the Vilnius Jewish Community) and journalism.



10. Vilnius Choral Synagogue (Pylimo St. 39)

The synagogue (by architect Dovydas Rozenhauzas) was opened in September 1903, on the Jewish New Year. The building, designed in the Moorish style, has a women's section and premises for the choir on the second floor. This is the only Jewish house of worship that survived after World War II in Vilnius. Several cantors who are famous all over the world were born in Vilnius. Prayers are held in the Synagogue every day according to the misnagdim tradition.

11. Tolerance Centre (Naugarduko St. 10/2) Ph. +370 5 262 9666, open: I–IV 10.00–18.00, V 10.00–16, VII 10.00–16.00

At the end of the 19th century this building was occupied by a canteen for the poor, organised by the Community for Cheap Jewish Canteens, which also worked during World War I. From 1918, a professional Jewish theatre was established here and after 1930 the building was occupied by the Mūza (Muse) cinema. The building was transferred to the State Gaon Jewish Museum in 1989; in 2001, the Tolerance Centre—which hosts various exhibitions and cultural as well as political events—was established here.

12. First Seat of the YIVO (J. Basanavičiaus St. 16)

In 1925, Max Weinreich established the seat of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute) in one of the apartments of this building. This institute soon turned into the largest Jewish scientific institution in the world. The leading figures of science and public affairs of the world—A. Einstein, Z. Freud, E. Bernstein and others—were members of the Honorary Presidium of the Institute. YIVO performed a mammoth task in cherishing Yiddish philology and taking care of Jewish heritage in Eastern Europe. YIVO was eliminated in Vilnius during the World War II.

13. Paneriai Memorial and Museum (Agrastų St. 15) Ph. +370 680 81278, open: VII–IV 9.00–17.00

The Paneriai woods were turned into a place of mass killing between July and October 1941; these atrocious events were repeated again between 1943 and 1944. Most Vilnius Jews found their death in ten pits and two trenches. A museum is now open here and a memorial has been created.

14. Jewish Cemetery (Sudervės kelio St.). The grave of the Vilna Gaon forms the main focal point of the cemetery. Famous Jewish public figures are buried in the cemetery.

15. Jewish Cemetery (Olandų St.). The cemetery is the place of eternal rest of Jewish public and religious figures.

16. Building (Rūdninkų St. 8). During the first half of the 20th century this building hosted various Jewish organisations (gymnasium, music institute) and during the period of the German occupation – the Grand Ghetto Council.

17. Buildings (Vilniaus St. 25 and 27). Between 1906 and 1909, the violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz studied in the Vilnius musical school which was located at 25 Vilniaus St. Public and political character Dr. Nachman Rachmielewicz lived in the house at 27 Vilniaus St.

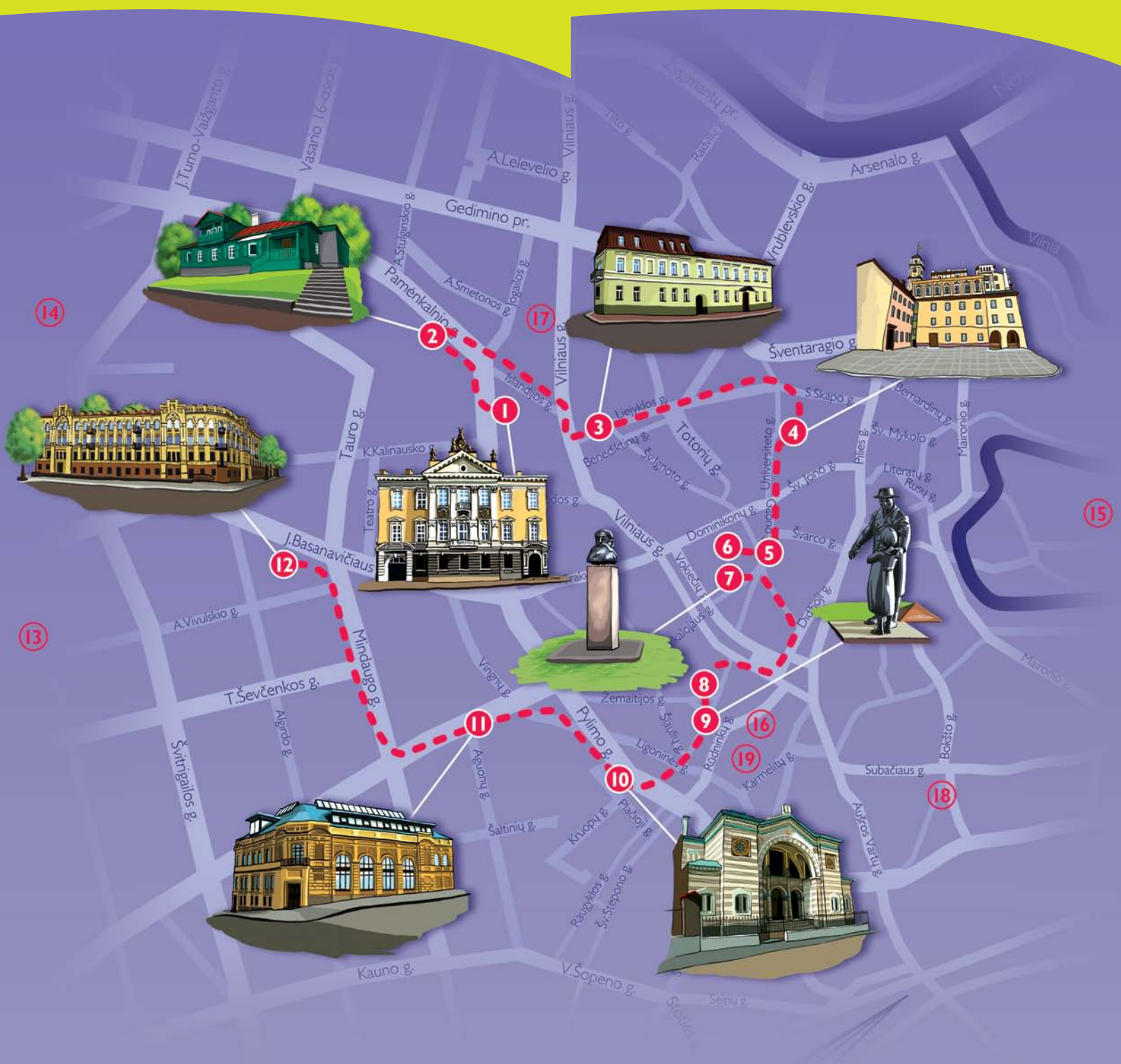
18. Romai Printing House (A. Strazdelio St. 1). The printing house published over a hundred books in Yiddish and Hebrew. In 1830, the Bible was printed here and in 1835 publication of the Talmud started.

19. Building (Karmelių St. 5). Jewish poet Moise Kulbak—who sang of Vilnius in his poetry—lived in this house in the 1920s.



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