

Remembering the Jewish Community of

Memel, Lithuania

Remembered by Greta Rafsky

The town of Memel, now known as Kleipeda in Lithuanian, lies on the Baltic Sea and is the only port city of Lithuania. It was founded in the 13th century. The earliest existing document in which Jews are mentioned is dated 1567, and refers to an edict expelling the Jews from the city. Jews settled freely again there after 1812, when the Jews of Prussia were emancipated. My mother and her 40-member family lived a comfortable, prosperous life in this thriving, lively city of approximately 50,000 in the mid 1930s. There were around 2000 Jews who were merchants and industrialists and people of various other professions. The fishing industry was a big part of life in this harbor town.

My mother always spoke of Memel with very fond memories, memories of going to the beach -- there were many. There were resort towns and villages, one of which was called Schwartz Ort where family members spent their vacations.

In addition to their general studies, young members of the Jewish community were involved in sports groups. My mother was in the Bar Kochba and Macabee organizations as a gymnast and relay runner. There were music lessons and Hebrew lessons. Often, private tutors were hired to come into homes to teach those subjects. There were synagogues and yeshivas. There was the Betar group for young Zionists. After the Jews were expelled from schools, my mother, who finished the equivalent of two years of college, tutored in piano, for she was a very fine musician.

The Jewish community was close knit. My mother's family was very close. During Rosh Hashanah of 1938, while in the synagogue, my mother noticed that many new faces had shown up. Because Memel was primarily a German city culturally, many Jews from

Berlin and other German cities fled here to leave Nazism behind. My mother wrote in her memoirs that she knew it would be their last Rosh Hashanah together as a family. She even stole away from her mother and sister to go home to write a letter to a well-to-do great uncle in Dallas, Texas, petitioning him to send papers for their exit. It never came in time. Many Memeler Jews who couldn't escape fled to Kovno, Lithuania, where, eventually, they were rounded up into a ghetto. The ghetto's population of more than 29,000 would be forced to occupy an area where 12,000 lived before.

By July 11, 1941, 7800 people had been killed in Kovno. On August 18, 550 Jews were shot. On September 26, 1000 Jews were rounded up and shot. On October 18, the Germans set ablaze the hospital for contagious diseases, burning alive the patients and staff, a total of 1800 Jews. By the end of October 28, 9200 Jews had been separated and were taken to Fort IX to be shot at close range. Fort IX became a killing site for trainloads of tens of thousands of Jews from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and France during the German occupation of Lithuania.

My mother and two of her six uncles, one aunt and three cousins survived the ghetto, slave labor and concentration camps. My mother died August 20, 2000.

Here is a [shtetlinks page](#) about Memel, which includes a detailed history. Also of interest is an [excerpt](#) from a Lithuanian Yizkor book. An [exhibition](#) about the Jewish community has been traveling through Europe and Israel since 2005.