

Group portrait of shoe workshop's owner Samuel Balomas (standing near the wall) and his workers in Salantai town, circa 1928. Photo by unknown author, Kretinga museum



JEW S

CRAFTSMANSHIP IN LITHUANIA





The Jews from Vabalninkas (Biržai district) town at market circa 1930s. LCSA

600 YEARS HISTORY OF JEWS CRAFTSMANSHIP IN LITHUANIA

Interesting facts

Litvaks – the Jews of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Jews of Lithuania nowadays – had lived in the region sedentary and abundantly for almost 600 years and had contributed certainly to the social and economic formation and development of each village, town (shtetl) or city. They started to settle here at the second half of 14th century and faced with much more favorable conditions to live and to develop trades and crafts than in Western Europe: newly christened society was tolerant to Jews, the most developed economic section was agriculture which led to engaging in new economic fields, towns were at the starting point of development and experienced new processes of guilds formation because of late Magdeburg rights.

The Rulers of Grand Duchy of Lithuania. From privileges to restrictions

Legalization of Jewish economic situation was carried out by granting privileges and

applying restrictions. During the period from 1388 to 1646 the Jews were granted with about 10 privileges by Grand Dukes of Lithuania based on which Jewish trades and crafts were not prohibited. On the other hand, Jewish crafts and trades were restricted practically in big towns as a result of small market space to hold both Christians and Jews. The main restrictors for the Jews were magistrates (municipalities) and guilds which limited the range of crafts, trades, marketing places and clients.

What were Lithuanian Jews engaged in during the past 600 years?

Jewish craftsmanship and predominant professions were stimulated and shaped by the needs of private Jewish community: butcher (for kosher food consumption), tailor (to make appropriate clothing by not mixing wool and linen fabrics in one garment (*shaatnez*)), also specific craftsmen who produced ritual accessories which community was using in everyday life and during religious services, or

craftsmen who published books in Hebrew and Yiddish. Butcher's craft is exclusively mentioned in the first privileges to the Jews granted by Grand Duke Vytautas (1389, to Grodno community's Jews).

- Several Jewish professions of crafts and trades were identified in general document for collecting funds from residents to reconstruct castles in 1576: the Jews carrying goods on horses, craftsmen of various fields living in major cities, craftsmen living in underprivileged cities, sellers living in towns and villages and carrying goods on themselves.
- According to the census data of Grand Duchy of Lithuania carried out in 1764-1765 the majority of Jews in Vilnius were craftsmen and mostly engaged in professions of furrier, tailor and trimmings manufacturer.
- According to the data of the end of 17th and 18th centuries in Samogi-

tia almost a half of all craftsmen were Jews and more than half or two-thirds of Jews were among the tailors, brewers, butchers and glaziers.

- Several professions in addition to trade were mentioned in the letter of Vilnius Jewish community dated to 1846: builders, jewelers, painters, bakers, tailors, lumberjacks, leather and suede processors, glaziers, furriers, bronze casters, manufacturers of candle holders, doctor's assistants, turners, wool manufacturers, pharmacists, teachers, clerks, flax hecklers, setters, blacksmiths, candle manufacturers, obstetricians, printers, engravers, dyers, etc.
- According to the census data of Russian empire carried out in 1897 more than one-third of all the Jews in the Russian empire equally engaged in both trade and crafts. Almost half of all the Jews worked as clothing and footwear manu-

Jewish craftsmen's workshop of sweeping brushes, Western Lithuania, 1938. Photo by Bronislovas Pocius ("Plungės žinios")





Yehudah Kaleko constructs wooden carriage wheels in his family's workshop, Eišiškės (Šalčininkai district), 1923.
Photo Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of The Shtetl Foundation

factors, the remaining half produced building materials, food products, engaged in metal processing, wood and furniture producing, textiles, fur and leather dressing, printing activity, tobacco products, ceramics, beverages.

- According to the census data of independent Lithuania carried out in 1923 more than two-thirds of all the Jews engaged in trade, the remaining one-third engaged in agriculture, industry, crafts, transport and communications, worked in state bodies and public organizations as well as other activities.

A craftsman in the eyes of society and community

The Jews were considered as competitors in the first place and as potential customers in the second place. There was a common attitude of the society of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, especially in urban areas, that Jews were free to engage in all crafts which satisfied only their closed community's needs.

Social status in traditional Jewish community depended on level of understanding the Torah, Talmud and rabbinic literature. Thus, the more a Jew could spend time in training this field, the higher was a Jew in the Jewish community. For this reason, work consuming huge physical efforts was quite unpopular among the Jews. The latter included professions related to trade, handicrafts and agriculture. Isolation between the Jewish elite and craftsmen was very strong, especially it reflected in the life of the synagogue: difference in their clothing, belonging to different associations of religious literature studying (elite – of Talmudic texts, craftsmen – of adaptations of religious law codices), establishment of separate synagogues where craftsmen could compete with each other. Professions of craftsmen were stratified inside the community: prestigious ones – printers, carvers and silversmiths, the lowest ones – tailors and shoemakers. Craftsmen were not the lowest social strata. The workers of rural transportation and factories were below them.

Enterprise and innovation – condition of survival?

Jewish business can be characterized as combining several activities at one time. Crafts were certainly not the only and the main source of a Jew employment and income, but rather an additional opportunity to earn money. Because of competing among themselves and with Christians, also having low-income a Jew seller was usually engaged in a certain craft and agriculture in his household. The Jews learned to adapt quickly to the new conditions because of the economic restrictions. For example, they were the first to launch a new type of business or crafts, e.g., during the 16th – 17th centuries they gave start to rent, pedlary, sales directly from the manufacturer, services at the client's house, also they are considered to be the first movers of advertising the grocery store or workshop by creating visible signs. What is more, the Jews were the first in the city or town to open a photo studio, a movie theater or a gas station in interwar Lithuania.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

- Ashkenazi (Western, Central and Eastern European Jews) and Sephardi (the Jews of Iberian peninsula and Balkans) were associated with different handicraft professions because of the different economic and social conditions in both societies: Ashkenazi Jews were engaged in industrial, handicraft and agriculture activities at one time in major cities, and especially outside the cities in rural areas, while Sephardi Jews were identified only with city's professions such as a moneylender, renter of various objects and intermediary between urban and rural areas. *kavimas tarp miesto ir kaimo.*
- While the townspeople were trying to limit and restrict Jewish economic activity, the yard of synagogue was the only allowable place to butcher kosher meat, so the butchery was set up outside the synagogue where butcher also sold the meat.

Group portrait of shoemakers in Salantai town: Moyshe Shindleris (standing in the middle) with his helpers, 1934.
Photo by unknown author, Kretinga museum



- An excellent example of building mechanized factories in late 19th century Lithuania is a Jew Chaim Frenkel's factory of leather processing and leather goods in Šiauliai founded in 1879 and lasted until 1995. It was famous not only in Lithuania, but also outside both Russian empire and interwar Europe. As the majority of workers were the Jews even the synagogue was built near the factory.
- According to business rules during the time of interwar Lithuania the Jews must have a business license and accounting must be filled in Lithuanian language. Also, the number of Lithuanians increased drastically in the business area and Lithuanian language was inevitable. As a consequence, a dictionary of tools and materials called "Craftsman" was released in the Jewish-Lithuanian languages in 1939.
- Craftsmen were trained at highly modern trade school ORT during the interwar in Lithuania and Vilnius city. ORT Association («Общество распространения ремесленного и земледельческого труда среди евреев в России» in

English – Association for the Promotion of Skilled Crafts and Agriculture among the Jews in Russia) was established in St. Petersburg, former Russian Empire, in 1880 by a group of prominent Jewish intellectuals, including famous Litvaks, in order to educate Jewish professional skills and to train Jewish youth in various crafts. According to the ideas of the Russian ORT, «Association for the Promotion of Crafts and Agriculture in Lithuania ORT» was established in Lithuania in 1920 and was open till 1940. The most modern craft school ORT was founded in Kaunas while courses were run in other Lithuanian cities and towns not only to improve accredited craftsmen but also to help gain an education in crafts for poor Jewish youth and war refugees. There were trained tailors, hat and corset manufacturers, builders, turners, mechanics, farmers, gardeners, and other professions. ORT Association founded the School of Crafts and the famous ORT Vilna Technical School in Vilnius, then occupied by Poland. ORT Vilna's students later became expert engineers, technicians, teachers, etc.



Original form of Chaim Frenkel's leather factory in Šiauliai. Photo by Šiauliai "Aušros" Museum



Tarucas's workshop "Shoe" in 1925, Žeimelis (Pakruojis district). Photo by „Žeimelis“, CD by Barry Mann



Certificate and seal of tailors' guild of Vilnius, 1883. LSHA



Certificate and seal of Vilnius Jewish jewelers' guild, 1883. LSHA

