

Širvintos (Shirvint)

Sirvintos (Shirvint in Yiddish) lies in eastern Lithuania, on the shores of the Sirvinta Stream, about 28 km. (17 miles) southeast of Ukmerge (Vilkomir), the district administrative center.

The town is mentioned in historical documents from the end of the fourteenth century. In 1580 it became the property of the Great Prince of Lithuania, but at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in the Northern War, the Swedes robbed the town.

After the third division of Poland in 1795 by the three superpowers of that time, Russia, Prussia and Austria, Russia annexed this section of Lithuania, including Shirvint. During Russian rule (1795 to 1915) the town was part of the province (*gubernia*) of Vilna.

In 1879 a station for mail carriages was established in Shirvint, as it lay on the road from Vikomir to Vilna.

After World War I ended and the independent Lithuanian state was established in 1918, fighting continued in Shirvint and its surroundings until 1922 between the Lithuanian army and the Bolsheviks, and later with the Polish army and Polish partisans. Only in the spring of 1923 was the border finally fixed between Poland and Lithuania, about 3 km. (2 miles) from Shirvint. This border was closed until 1938.

From the end of the nineteenth century and during the period of independent Lithuania, Shirvint was a county administrative center.

Jewish Settlement until after World War II

Jews probably settled in Shirvint at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Some rented land from the estate owner, Pesitsky, while others opened inns and pubs along the road between Vilkomir and Vilna, and the town grew and developed. Later, when Pesitsky evicted his Jewish tenants, their main livelihood came from keeping inns, pubs and shops.

In 1847 there were 216 Jews in the town. Fifty years later, the government census revealed that 1,864 residents resided in Shirvint, 1,413 (76%) of them being Jews.

Due to the worsening economic situation, the *Lehem Aniyim* (Bread for the Poor) society was established in 1881, as was a society named *Ma'ahal Kasher* (Kosher Meals) which supplied kosher food for Jewish soldiers serving in the local garrison. The number of Jewish soldiers increased from five to twenty-five by 1887. In 1903 the *Refuah Shleimah* (Complete Recovery) society was established to aid the sick in the town.



A street in Shirvint



Shirvint welfare committee elected by the Chicago committee

Before the war there was a Loan and Savings Bank in town.

Shirvint's social and economic connections were primarily with Vilna. Students and apprentices went there to study and to work, returning home for holidays and vacations bringing with them the big city atmosphere and news of its political and cultural happenings. Some Shirvint Jews became advocates of the *Haskalah* and also of the *Hibath Zion* and Zionist movements, with which they were very impressed. In the *Hibath Zion* receipt books there are names of Shirvint Jews; the receipts of the *Hovevei Zion* organization in Vilna for the

years 1885-1888 also show donations from Shirvint Jews. Fifty *Shekalim* were sold locally in 1902.

A single Shirvint donor, probably to *Eretz-Yisrael*, Leah Bernshtein fiancée of Yitzchok Rodin of Panevezys, was listed in *Hamelitz* #125 of 1893.

After the 1905 revolution in Russia, fears that pogroms against the Jews could occur caused Shirvint Jewish youth to organize a self-defense group.

Rabbis who officiated in Shirvint during this period include:

Yits'hak Grodzensky (1801-1867), served in Shirvint for seven years

Yits'hak-Eliezer-Lipa Shereshevsky (1840-1920)

Menahem-Mendel HaLevi-Lifshitz, served in the 1890s, died in 1912.

Between the years 1834-1895 there were 44 subscribers to rabbinic literature.

In an 1869-1878 list of immigrants to the United States eight Shirvint Jews are mentioned; E. Segal, J.B. Openheim, E. Palumboim, B. and M. Kabaker, S. Orzhalkovsky, T. Bubltsky, M. Manheim.

During World War I, in the summer of 1915, the Russian military ordered Shirvint Jews exiled far into Russia. During the German occupation (1915-1918) Jews from Vilna settled in Shirvint. After the war only two-thirds of the exiles returned, and had to be helped by *YeKoPo* (Jewish Aid Committee).

During the period of independent Lithuania, Shirvint Jews made their living from trade, crafts and peddling. Several families dealt with agriculture, their main income being earned on market days.

According to the government survey of 1931 there were 37 shops in Shirvint, of which 34 (92%) were Jewish owned. The distribution is given in the table below:

Type of business	Total	Owned by Jews
Groceries	3	2
Butcher's shops and Cattle Trade	4	4
Restaurants and Taverns	2	2
Grains and Flax	1	1
Textile Products and Furs	6	6
Leather and Shoes	4	4
Pharmacy	2	1
Timber and Heating Material	12	1
Hardware Products	1	12
Bicycles, electrical appliances, sewing machines	1	1
Other	1	0

According to the same survey there were three wool-combing workshops and one flourmill in Jewish hands.



A Jewish peddler in Shirvint

In 1937, 49 Jewish artisans worked there: nine tailors, nine shoemakers, six oven builders, five bakers, five butchers, three hatters, three barbers, two tinsmiths, two watchmakers, two dressmakers, one carpenter and two others.

The Jewish Popular Bank (*Folksbank*) was established in Shirvint in 1924 and was accepted into the Union of Popular Banks in Lithuania in 1928. At this time it had 191 members, and local Jews were greatly assisted by this institution in their struggle for daily existence.

In 1939 there were thirty telephone subscribers, two of them Jewish.



The Talmud-Torah (1938)

Slowly the number of Jews in Shirvint decreased. Being cut off from Vilna and its region as well having to compete with Lithuanian merchants, caused the liquidation of many Jewish businesses. This, and the effects of the Lithuanian economic crisis of the 1930s, resulted in the emigration of many Shirvint Jews to South Africa, America, Cuba, Mexico and *Eretz-Yisrael*.

About 100 Jewish children from Shirvint studied at the Hebrew school of the *Tarbut* network. Some graduates continued their studies at the *Or* (Light) Hebrew gymnasium in Vilkomir. There were also a Yiddish school and two *Talmud Torah* schools with about fifty pupils, that were established by a former Shirvinter in Chicago.

Shirvint's youth divided into two groups, Zionist and anti-Zionist, which meant that there was a split in the town's cultural life; thus two different large libraries were active locally, one Hebrew and one Yiddish.



The stamp of the Hebrew library

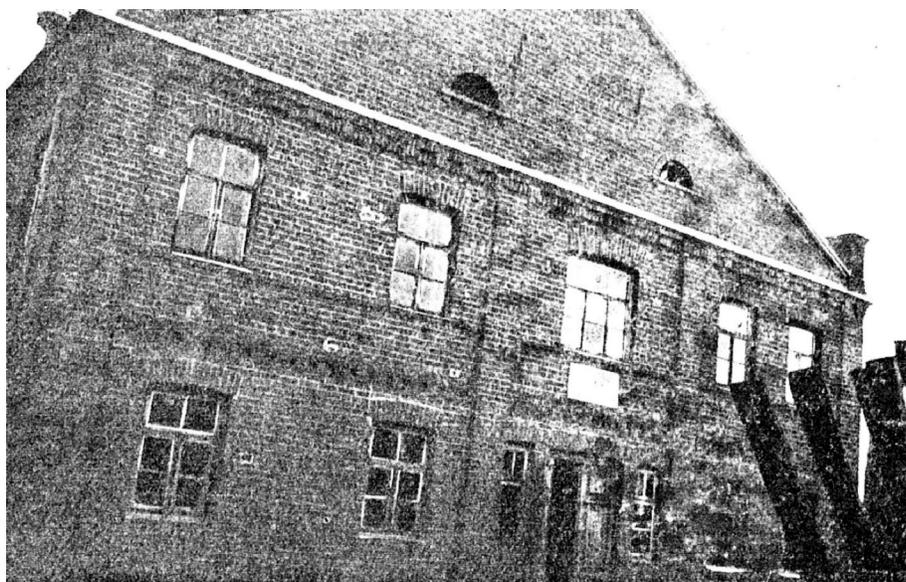
Many Shirvint Jews were members of the Zionist movement. A society named after Nakhman Sirkin (Zionist Social Party) and the committee for *Keren Kayemeth LeYisrael* (The Jewish National Fund) functioned here, and initiated numerous cultural activities. The table below shows how Shirvint Zionists voted for four Zionist congresses:

Cong No.	Year	Tot Shek	Total Votes	Labor Party Z"S Z"Z		Rev	Gen Zion		Gros	Miz
				A	B					
16	1929	44	16	9	2	3	2	---	---	---
17	1931	29	21	6	3	7	5	---	---	---
18	1933	---	145	82		10	3	---	43	5
19	1935	---	344	181		---	1	5	132	64

Key: Cong No. = Congress Number, Tot Shek = Total Shkalim, Rev = Revisionists, Gen Zion = General Zionists, Gros = Grosmanists, Miz = Mizrakhi

HaShomer HaTsair, *Betar* and *Benei Akiva* were among the Zionist youth organizations. Sport activities were carried out in the local *Maccabi* branch.

Many *Yeshiva* graduates lived in Shirvint and a daily *Gemara* page was studied in all three prayer houses and in the *Shtibl*.



The Beth Midrash



The Shtibl of the Hasidim



The *Shamash* of the *Beth Midrash* waking people for the morning prayer (*Shaharith*)

Rabbi Avraham Aryeh Leib Grosbard (1870-1941), served in Shirvint from 1913, together with his son-in-law Zundl Kruk who eventually took over from him. Both were murdered in the Holocaust.

Bikur Holim and *Linath HaTsedek* were the local welfare institutions.

Personalities born in Shirvint included:

Eliyahu-Eliezer Grodzensky (1831-1887), the son-in-law of rabbi Israel Salanter, who was one of the three members of the religious high court in Vilna.

Leon Hazanovitz (his real name was Katriel Shub 1882-1925), one of the leaders of the *Poalei Zion* party, writer and editor of his party's periodicals.

Avner Tenenboim (1848-1913), reporter and writer published hundreds of articles and books on nature, history and geography in America. He translated books from world literature into Yiddish, which were sought after by Yiddish readers.

Tsevi Bernshtein, arrived in *Eretz-Yisrael* in 1935, an executive member of *Hapoel HaMizrahi*.

During World War II and Afterwards

In June 1940, Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union and became a Soviet Republic. Following new rules, light industrial enterprises owned by Jews were nationalized. A number of Jewish shops were nationalized and commissars were appointed to manage them. Supply of goods decreased and, as a result, prices soared. The middle class, mostly Jewish, bore the brunt, and their standard of living dropped. All Zionist parties and youth organizations were disbanded and the Hebrew school was closed. At least three Jewish families from Shirvint were exiled to Siberia by the Soviet authorities.

A few days after the German invasion into the Soviet Union on June 22nd, 1941, German soldiers arrived in Shirvint. They set fire to the three prayer houses and spread the Torah scrolls in the streets so that people would trample on them. A Jewish woman and her son who lived in the building of the *Beth Midrash* were burned alive.

Several days later, after the German soldiers left the town and moved eastwards, Lithuanian nationalists took over the rule of the town. Many people who had had some connections with Soviet authorities were detained, both Jews and non-Jews. All were sent to prison in Vilkomir; the non-Jews received 25 lashes and were released. The Jews were executed.

In the middle of July 1941 young men and women up to the age of eighteen were selected for agricultural work on the Sheshulki farm, about 10 km. (6 miles) from Shirvint. From time to time groups of 20 to 25 people were taken and sent to so-called labor elsewhere. Later it became clear they had been imprisoned in Vilkomir.

On August 10th, 1941 all Jews who owned a horse and a cart were ordered to present themselves on the morrow, ready for a journey. Lithuanian police pulled men off the streets and put them on the carts, and many Jews who resisted were sentenced on the spot to die by fire. In fact, fuel was spilled over them and they were burned alive.

At the end of August all Jews were ordered to leave their houses and move to about twenty ramshackle buildings in the old part of town, the area around the bath house and the *Mikveh*. The rulers called this place the Ghetto. According to one source, the old rabbi Avraham-Leib Grosbard and his son-in-law Zundl Kruk tried to organize life a little, but did not succeed, because Lithuanian auxiliary police would come and demand that the Jews hand over their money and property.

At dawn on September 18th, 1941 (26th of Elul, 5701) the ghetto was surrounded by Germans and Lithuanians. All Jews were forced into trucks and transferred to Vilkomir. From there they were taken to Pivonija forest near the town where pits had already been prepared. They were forced to undress and were then pushed into the pits and murdered. A few resisted.

Little children were thrown into the air and the Lithuanians shot at them for live target practice. On the same day a sign was erected at the entrance of Shirvint stating that the town was *Judenrein* (Clean of Jews).



The entrance gate to the murder site at Pivonija forest



The mass graves at Pivonija forest



The monument at Pivonija forest



The tablet on the monument

The inscription in Yiddish, Hebrew and Lithuanian: "At this site in the year 1941 Hitler's murderers and their local helpers murdered 10,239 Jews, men, women and children."

After the war two Jews returned. In 1989 only two Jews lived in Shirvint.

At the beginning of the 1990s, on the site of the Jewish cemetery which had become a housing estate, a memorial was erected with an inscription in Yiddish and Lithuanian: "The Jewish cemetery was at this site until 1961".

Sources:

Yad Vashem Archives, file 22/54

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Jewishgen Org.>Databases>Lithuania. Compiled by Jeffrey Maynard