Lithuanian Jewish Relations

Lithuania was an independent nation between WWI and WWII, from 1918-1940. Lithuania was unlawfully invaded and occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940-1941. Nazi Germany then invaded and occupied Lithuania from 1941-1944. The Holocaust occurred in Lithuania during this time, and 90% of Lithuanian Jews, over 200,000 in number, were killed. The Soviet Union took over again in 1944 until 1990. No proper historic research was done during Soviet occupation and many facts were distorted to benefit Soviet propaganda.

Lithuania was the first Soviet republic to declare independence from the USSR in 1990, and has consistently followed principles of restoration of historic justice. In 2002, Lithuanian joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

In accordance with the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities, two distributions of funds totaling over €75 ($80) million were made to the Good Will Foundation. Though these payments reflect only a partial value of properties, they provided much needed funds to support Jewish community life in Lithuania, restore several Jewish heritage sites, and address welfare needs of elderly survivors. For reparations made by other countries see U.S. State Dept. The Just Act Report to Congress.

In 2022, Lithuania, in an effort to solve cases of disputed commemorations and prevent future cases, passed a new Law on the Prohibition of the Promotion of Totalitarian or Authoritarian Regimes and Their Ideologies. The Lithuanian government has adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism and recommended that all public authorities take this definition into account in their work: *Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities*.

September 23 has been designated as the Day of Remembrance of the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews, and commemorative events take place across the country, notably a Memory Road Walk retracing the paths that Holocaust victims were forced to walk to the sites of their massacre. The largest sites are the Kaunas Ninth Fort and Paneriai, near Vilnius, where there is a museum with planned expansion.

A Holocaust history curriculum has been developed and officially adopted by the Lithuanian Ministry of Education. Lithuania has also established over 160 Tolerance Education Centers in schools, local museums, and education centers. In the U.S., the Lithuanian American Community (LAC) Education Council works with the Lithuanian Education Ministry and various Jewish organizations to incorporate Holocaust education programs in its schools in all chapters across the U.S. In 2024, for example, LAC, in cooperation with YIVO, is teaching its schoolchildren about Beba Epstein, often referred to as the Anne Frank of Lithuania. Millersville University professor emeritus Saulius Suziedelis' latest book "Crisis, War and the Holocaust in Lithuania" is the first scholarly English language study of this era.

The primary Jewish museums in Lithuania are: the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History, with two new branches undergoing renovation; the memorial Museum of Holocaust in Lithuania and the Vilna Ghetto; the Museum of Culture and Identity of Lithuanian Jews. Local governments work with the Lithuanian Jewish Community to maintain Jewish cemeteries, erect monuments, install memorial plaques and signage about Holocaust remembrance sites and Jewish history. In the U.S., Lithuanian Jewish history is incorporated into many museums, notably the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Weitzman Museum of American Jewish History, and the Victims of Communism Museum. In 2013, the Weitzman hosted the first Lithuanian Jewish Symposium in America.

The Jewish population in Lithuania today numbers over 6,000. There are 48 synagogues in Lithuania, with 14 of them managed by the Lithuanian Jewish Community, and the balance being renovated and restored by municipalities.

Over 900 Lithuanians have been recognized as Righteous Among Nations -- the honorific used by the State of Israel recognizing those who risked their lives to save Jews from extermination by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.

In 2023, the Mazvydas Lithuanian National Library and YIVO jointly established the Antanas Ulpis Award whose name honors the Lithuanian who helped save over 30,000 Jewish archives. The Lithuanian American Community has made a contribution to support this historic award promoting Lithuanian Jewish relations.

Founded in 1951, LAC is a community organization that fosters the growth of democratic institutions in the country of our heritage and preserves Lithuanian cultural identity in the U.S. The LAC's Public Affairs Committee chair, Krista Butvydas Bard, also serves as Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Lithuania to Pennsylvania. LAC works in conjunction with Congress and other U.S. and Baltic organizations to further the goals of community and democracy building.