



“Jewish Heritage in Estonia and Latvia”

Heidi M. Szpek, Professor and Chair
Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies
Central Washington University

This past summer, partly in preparation for courses I teach on Judaism and the Holocaust and partly to continue research on Jewish material culture, especially Jewish epitaphs, my travels took me back to Poland and Lithuania but then northwards for my first visit to Latvia and Estonia. In the northernmost Baltic state of Estonia, located beside the Baltic Sea, is the city of Tallinn, a city established in the 11th century. A panoramic view of this city from the Baltic Sea or moving eastward along its shores reveals the old city walls, and within these red stone walls rise the spires of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches, the oldest – St. John’s Lutheran Church dates to the early 13th century. Just outside the old city is the only extant synagogue in Estonia – Beit Bella Synagogue, beside which stands a Jewish Community Center. Within this center, the third floor houses a small but detailed Estonia Museum of Jewish Life, including the newly dedicated memorial to the 947 Estonian Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Statistically the number of Estonian Jews, who perished in the Holocaust, may seem small compared to those Jews, who perished from Eastern Europe. However, it is significant to note that [Jewish settlement in Estonia](#) was always small and did not begin until the early 19th century and then with restrictions that those Jews, who did settle, were once Cantonist conscripts to the Tsarist army or select merchants or guildsmen.

The Jewish population today in Estonia is about 2000, the majority of whom reside in Tallinn. My guide at the Beit Bella Synagogue reported that approximately 400 Jews were actively involved in the community, with about 150 regularly attending services. Though small in number there is community pride in this recently dedicated synagogue (2004), friendliness at the community center, and energy in their museum's research to document what remains of Jewish heritage in Estonia.



Tallinn Synagogue (foreground); Estonian Jewish Community Center (background)



Entrance to Tallinn Synagogue



[Entrance to Estonian Jewish Community Center](#)



Foyer of Beit Bella Synagogue



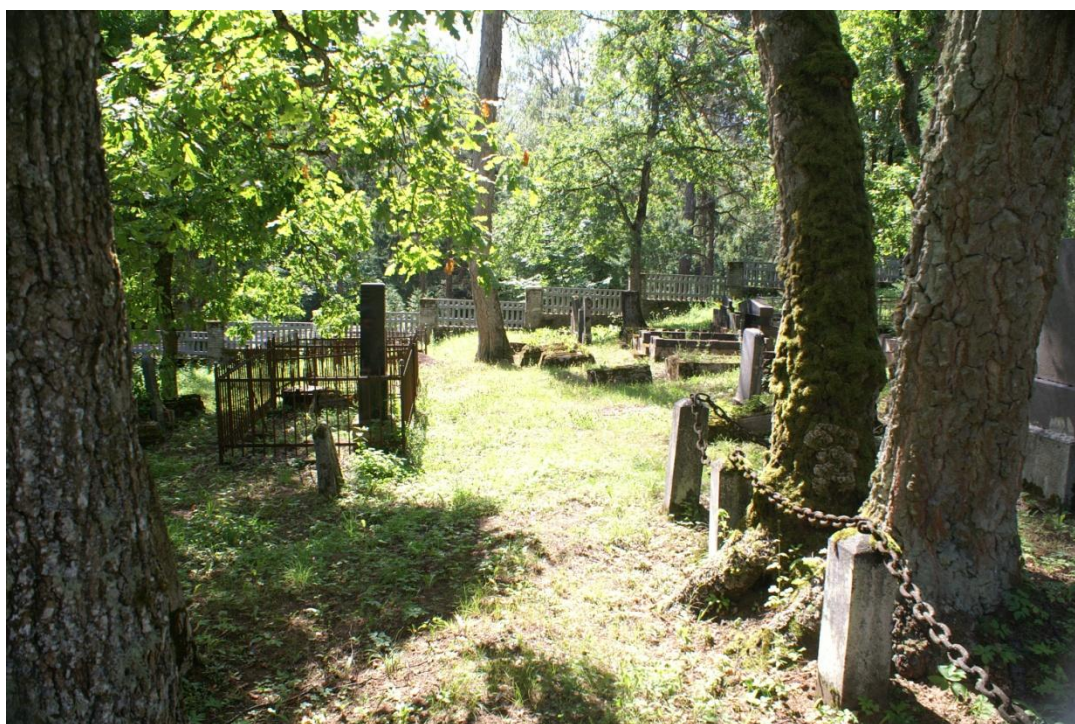
Interior of Beit Bella Synagogue



Memorial Plaque at Holocaust Memorial Gallery

The impact of the Holocaust on Estonia Jewry essentially brought to Estonia the designation of being the first country to be “Judenfrei” (Jew free). Before Auschwitz and the death camps in Poland were established, Czech and German Jews were brought to this little out-of-the-way country for execution. As for Estonian Jews, Estonia’s response to the Final Solution was swift. Ghettos were not needed rather Jewish men were imprisoned and then executed. Their crime was simply noted as: Jew. Women and children, who initially were able to work, were later shot at massacre sites. Such places as Klooga Concentration Camp, Hartu Women’s Camp, and the Paterei Prison in Tallinn, now preserve memorials or markers to these devastations, yet their names remain familiar to few.

East of Tallinn, in the town of Rakvere, a small Jewish cemetery, adjacent to the Protestant cemetery, still remains – a witness to the former Jewish presence in Estonia. The local population today is attentive to serve as caretakers for those once part of their small Jewish community.



Rakvere Jewish Cemetery

In Väike-Maarja, south of Rakvere, I sought in vain the burial site of Cantonist boys. This search evoked remembrance of the conscription of Jewish boys (and other young men) under the Tsar, years before World War I, as well as the inequity of life before the Nazi Occupation and later under Communism.

I was impressed by the efforts of [Estonian Jewish Museum](#) Director Mark Rõbak to document the extant Jewish epitaphs throughout Estonia. Rõbak's efforts and my visit assisted me in my own research, seeking to trace the movement of literary patterns in Jewish epitaphs. Within the Old Town Tallinn, I also discovered that the practice of reusing tombstones for construction was not unique to the Nazis or Soviets during their occupations. In the alley of St. Catherine's Catholic Church in Tallinn, tombstones, dating back to the 14th-

15th centuries, are on display. Once burial markers, they were used by the burgomaster of Tallinn in the late 19th century to lay the floor of a barn, located on the ruins of the church.



Tombstones on display, St. Catherine's Alley, Tallinn

In Latvia, Riga served as home while exploring Jewish material culture and Holocaust remembrance. The Peitavas Street Synagogue built in 1903 within Old Town Riga still functions today, saved from destruction (as was the fate of other synagogues throughout Latvia under Nazi occupation) because of its location in Old Town. If Peitavas Synagogue were set aflame, other buildings in Old Town might also burn. Outside of Old Town Riga, the ruins of the Choral Synagogue, built originally in 1871, serve as a memorial to the Holocaust. On 4 July 1941, hundreds of Jews perished in the synagogue set aflame by the Nazis. Beside this memorial stands another memorial, remembering Zanus Lipke and righteous Latvians, who risked their lives to save more than 400 Jews.



Choral Synagogue, Holocaust Memorial, Riga



Memorial to Zanus Lipke and Righteous, Riga

The Jewish theatre still stands in Riga, housing a Jewish Museum on its third floor, while also serving as a center for community events. A Jewish *Beis Midrash* (house of study), now an apartment complex, remains near what would have been the Riga Ghetto. As for the old Jewish cemetery, all that remains is a park with a simple monument that marks its former

function. The names of surrounding streets indicate this area was once the Jewish quarter outside of Old Town Riga.



Lobby, Former Jewish Theatre, Riga



Jewish Museum, Riga



Former Jewish *Beis Midrash* (House of Study), Riga



Old Jewish Cemetery, Riga

Of the Jewish cemeteries I visited south and west of Riga, the care by local communities was impressive. In Latvia, in general, great attention is given to properly marking the location of Jewish cemeteries and now defunct synagogues – a practice not replicated in my travels throughout Poland or Lithuania.



Aizpute Jewish Cemetery, near Liepaja



Jewish Cemetery, west of Riga



Former Synagogue, Aizpute



Valdermarpils (former) Synagogue

Impressive yet dismal were the Holocaust memorials that marked the annihilation of Latvian Jews. Their designs, whether stark grey Communist gargantuan edifices or exquisite contemporary constructions, evoke both artistic awe and the incomprehensible because of what transpired at these sites. In Latvia, the names Kaiserwald, Rumbala, Bikernieku Forest, and Liepaja are given to these places of devastation; however, the process of annihilation was unlike that which one equates with Auschwitz-Birkenau. Annihilation was swift through mass shootings, a style of execution comparable to [Babi Yar](#) in the [Ukraine](#). Excluding Leipaja,

these memorial sites are within or just on the outskirts of Riga and today remember those Jews held within the Riga Ghetto. The exquisite Liepaja memorial stands beside the soft blue waters of the western Baltic Sea ... and a sewage treatment plant; its victims were Jews shot in Liepaja or brought from nearby towns.



Kaiserwald Concentration Camp, Salaspils, near Riga , with Children's Memorial



Rumbala Forest Massacre Memorial, Riga



Family Names preserved on memorial rocks



Bikernieku Forest Massacre Memorial, Riga



Walkway beside mass graves, Bikernieku



Baltic Sea beside Liepaja Holocaust Memorial



Entrance to Liepaja Holocaust Memorial



Enormous Menorah-shaped Holocaust Memorial, Liepaja



Verses from Lamentations mark symbolic candle flames on memorial menorah

[Jewish settlement in Latvia](#) came in the early 19th century, as in Estonia, restricted to those with useful occupations. Before World War I, Latvia's Jewish population was approximately 190,000, which diminished by over 50% during World War I due to deportations eastward into Russia. At the beginning of World War II, Latvia's Jewish population was over 93,000. By December 1941, approximately 70,000 Jews perished in these massacres. Today in Latvia, 13 Jewish communities remain in nine cities – the largest community is that of Riga with approximately 8000 Jews; the smallest in Luzda with 15 Jewish members.

This first visit to Estonia and Latvia left me with varied responses – an oppressive awe at the depth of hatred wrought by the members of the local population, who assisted the Nazis in their annihilation of the Jews in these two tiny Baltic countries; great respect for the Jewish communities now rebuilding themselves in the aftermath of such devastation; and admiration for the young Estonians and Latvians, whom I daily observed energetically engaged in restoring and rebuilding their countries out of the devastations of the Holocaust, World War II and under Communism. I look forward to my next trip to these Baltic States. There are still

sites of Jewish heritage to visit ... and a contagious energy in the current generation as they acknowledge their past while building and embracing their future.

For those interested in studying about the Holocaust, please join me in my spring course:

RELS 453 The Legacy of the Holocaust, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00-4:05pm

For further information about the Holocaust in Estonia and subsequent establishment of memorials see:

http://www.jewish.ee/holocaust/holokaust_broshure_en.pdf

For further information about the history of Jews in Estonia see:

<http://estonia.eu/about-estonia/society/the-jewish-community-in-estonia.html>

For further information about the Holocaust in Latvia and subsequent establishment of memorials see:

http://www.rumbula.org/holocaust_latvia_overview.shtml

For further information about the history of Jews in Latvia see:

<http://www.jews.lv/en/>