

Varniai (Vorne)

Varniai (Vorne in Yiddish) lies in the western part of Lithuania, in the Zamut (Zemaitija) region, on the west bank of the small stream Varnele, about 30 km. (18 miles) south of the district administrative centre, Telz (Telsiai). The large lake Lukstas is situated to the south of the town while there are two other small lakes on the north side.

The settlement dates back to the sixteenth century. At that time, a settlement called Medininkai, on the east bank of the stream, included the residence of the Bishop of Zamut. Later this settlement was renamed Varniai. In 1635, the town was granted the Magdeburg rights of self-rule. The emblem of the town is highlighted by a Latin inscription: *Sigillium Civitatis Vornensis Ducatus Samogit* (Vorne is subordinate to the Bishop of Zamut).

In 1740 a school of higher education for priests was moved to Vorne. The town fairs brought 20,000 visitors, with many from Vilna and Riga. The Northern Wars with Sweden, the rebellions against the Russian rule, and the fires and epidemics wrought havoc on the people of Vorne. In 1683, as a result of the Polish rebellion, the residence of the bishop and the school for the priests were both moved from Vorne. Nevertheless, with the construction of barracks for the local Russian garrison, the town developed economically and culturally. The number of residents increased, and the number of professionals and artisans among them increased as well; thus at the end of the nineteenth century about 60 shops and taverns and some 30 light industry workshops were in operation in the town.

Throughout Russian rule (1795-1915), German military rule (1915-1918) and that of independent Lithuania (1918-1940), Vorne was a county administrative centre of the Telz district. At the outskirts of the town the Lithuanian government established a detention camp for about 150 political prisoners, mostly with communist leanings. There were quite a few Jews among these prisoners.

The Jewish Settlement until after World War 1

The first Jews probably settled in Vorne in the second half of the seventeenth century. The bishop granted rights to a few Jews to run taverns, sell liquor and collect taxes during the fairs. Later, peddlers, merchants and artisans arrived in town. Jews provided the majority of tradesmen, including tailors.

Their workshops were small and run by families.

The tradesmen of the time numbered twenty-two tailors, ten carters, sixteen shoemakers, six blacksmiths, three carpenters, three hatters, two builders, one book binder, one painter and one mould-maker. There were also well known timber tradesmen: one of these, Aharon Raskin, was a very prominent member of the community. The timber was loaded on to rafts and sent to Memel (Klaipeda) en route to Germany. The local flourmill was owned by Rafael Zax. Liquor distillation plants were also run by Jews. Several families kept stores, and they would travel to the large regional town of Shavl (Siailiai) to stock up on goods.

As the population grew, a cemetery and prayer houses were built – the *Kloiz* and the *Shtiblekh* on two sides of the *Shul*, a building with a high dome for prayers in the summer.

Later, welfare associations were established. *Linath HaTsedek*, *Bikur Holim*, *Gemiluth Hesed*, *Hakhnasath Kalah* and *Hakhnasath Orkhim* were among these.

Social assistance was mostly provided by generous women with initiative. One such was Ida-Pesia, the wife of Aharon Raskin the timber merchant. He was also the *Gabai* of the local *Yeshiva* with its 60 students. This *Yeshiva* was established and directed by

Nahum-Lipa Hananyah, and it existed for 35 years until his death in 1910. Many of the young people in the town studied in the Telz Yeshiva and in other *Yeshivoth* in the area. Quite a few acquired a general education as well.

In 1874, a blood libel was initiated by a local priest who gave money to a Christian boy to disappear from the town. Then he announced that the Jews had murdered the boy for his blood. The priest, together with a group of peasants armed with knives and sticks, went out in the streets and attacked every Jew they met. A few were taken to the hospital. The uproar stopped when the boy returned home.

In 1847, 1,084 Jews lived in the town. Half a century later, according to the government census of 1897, there were 3,121 residents in Varniai, including 1,226 (30%) Jews.

Jewish agrarians were Motl Sheifer, the owner of a water-powered flourmill; David Karklaner; Hirsh Krengl; Velve Shnaider; Mosheh the *Yanepoler* and Shelomoh Katz the *Vidmanter*. They lived in the villages around Vorne.

Jewish children aged three years and older studied at the traditional *Heder*. *Heder Metukan* (improved *Heder*) was opened several years before World War 1. Most of the students came from the more affluent families. One of them, Ya'akov-David Kamzon, became famous as a writer and poet in *Eretz-Israel*. In addition to religious subjects, the school taught Hebrew grammar, mathematics and other secular subjects. There was considerable objection to this method of learning from the more conservative circles in town. As a result, the initiator and director of this institution, Yeshayah Ben Zion Fridman was questioned. He was known as a strictly religious and educated man who combined intellectuality with Zionism. Loyal to his views, he changed his surname to the Hebrew *Ish-Shalom* (Man of Peace). Years later, one of his sons, Mordehai Ish-Shalom, became the mayor of Jerusalem.

The *Hibath Zion* movement was very active in Vorne. In 1898, it had 100 members. The list of donors to the settlement of *Eretz-Israel* published in *HaMelitz* in 1898, 1899, 1900 and 1903 contained 127 names of Vorne Jews. (see **Appendix 1**). The fund-raisers were as follows: in 1898, Hayim Gutman. Zalkind Likht; in 1899, Hayim Levin; in 1903, Hayim Leshem.

The cemetery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem has at least five headstones of Vorne Jews:

Rabbi Simhah son of Eliyahu, dies 1865

Rivkah-Leah daughter of Yehezkel-Pinhas, died 1867

Peshe daughter of Yehudah, died 1869

Dusha wife of Faivel, died 1869

Yehezkel-Pinhas son of Mordehai, died 1871

With the outbreak of World War 1 in August 1914, the Germans bombed Vorne. Most of the Jews ran for shelter, but several days later, after the German army occupied the town, they returned home. Throughout that war, Vorne residents were under strict German rule and, among other orders, endured the forced labor imposed on many of them. However, Jews gained permanent representation in public affairs on behalf of the community, which had established a good rapport with the local German commander. Nevertheless, a local group of Jewish youths still found it necessary to find secure hiding places for the forced labourers, and help many to escape.

A local Rabbi reported to German authorities in 1918 that seven Jews died in the first quarter of that year: five women, one man and one child.

After World War 1, there was still no peace for Vorne and the surrounding areas. Sporadic fights among the Lithuanians and other nations continued and the Jews feared that the unrest would result in pogroms. To be ready for this potential evil, a

self-defence group of Jewish youths armed themselves with pistols. They were trained by German deserters hired by the community. These Germans together with the Jewish youngsters stood guard over the community until stability was restored to the region.

The Rabbis who served in Vorne during this period were:

Shemuel Shmelke Itinga (died in 1902)

Benjamin Verber (also died in 1902)

Josef-Leib Blokh, (1849-1930) served in Vorne between the years 1902-1904 and later became the director of Telz *Yeshivah*

Shalom-Yits'hak Levitan (1878-1941) served in Vorne 1908-1909, published several books on Judaism. He was murdered in the Holocaust

Yisrael Yehoshua Segal, son of Shemuel-Aryeh, born in 1864 (in Vorne from 1898).

The Period of Independent Lithuania (1918-1940)

With the establishment of the independent Lithuanian State in 1918, most Vorne Jews were old town residents who had lived there before World War 1. They continued to make their living in the trades, small commerce and crafts.

Following the Law of Autonomies for Minorities issued by the new Lithuanian government, the minister of Jewish Affairs, Dr Menachem (Max) Soloveitshik ordered elections to community committees (*Va'adei Kehilah*) to be held in the summer of 1919. In July 1920 the elections to the community committee of Vorne were held and nine members were elected; three General Zionists, three non-party men, two tradesmen and one affiliated to the *Mizrachi* party. The committee served in most fields of Jewish life until the law was annulled in the spring of 1926. Jewish representatives were elected to the municipal council of Vorne.

The survey conducted by the community committee in 1920 revealed that there were approximately 800 Jewish residents in town, 54% of them women. Those under 18 years of age comprised 43% of the population, the age group of 19 to 50 was 37% and those between the ages of 51 and 85, the balance (20%). 70% of the Jews were born in Vorne. Among the 132 gainfully employed persons, 34 were shopkeepers, 22 were small traders and peddlers, 14 were shoemakers, eight tailors, eight bakers, eight butchers, four carters and drivers, four *melamdin* (teachers), three hat-makers, three pharmacists, three tinsmiths, two builders, two carpenters, two cantors, one doctor, one watchmaker, one porter, one *Klizemer* (musician at Jewish weddings), one bath attendant, one tanning worker, one hostel owner and one dental assistant.

The Government survey of 1931 listed 23 shops in Vorne, 21 (91%) Jewish owned. The distribution according to the type of business is presented in the table below:

Type of business	Total	Owned by Jews
Groceries	4	3
Butcher shops and Cattle Trade	4	3
Restaurants and Taverns	1	1
Food Products	1	1
Textile Products and Furs	5	5
Leather and Shoes	2	2
Haberdashery and house utensils	1	1
Watches, Jewels and Optics	1	1
Hardware Products	2	2
Bicycles, electrical equipment, sewing machines	1	1
Transportation, Machines	1	1

Also listed in the same survey, were three barber shops, a power station, a workshop for wool combing and a flour mill, all owned by Jews of Vorne.

With the decrease in Vorne's Jewish population, Jewish trade decreased proportionately. In 1937, only 40 tradesmen remained in the town; ten shoemakers, six tailors, four carpenters, three butchers, three watchmakers, three tinsmiths, two hat-makers, two oven builders, two blacksmiths, one binder, one barber and three others.

In 1939, of the 24 telephone lines in Vorne, four were in Jewish homes.

In the 1920's, a Hebrew school with *Tarbut* affiliation, a library, a drama group and the *Folksbank* (Popular Bank) were established in Vorne. The *Folksbank* had 107 members in 1927, and by 1929 the number had decreased to 92. Although the bank provided great assistance, the condition of the Jewish shopkeepers and tradesmen deteriorated from year to year. The systematic anti-Semitic propaganda of various Lithuanian associations contributed to these difficulties.

There were verbal and physical attacks against Jews and their language on numerous occasions. On October 9th, 1923 all Jewish signs in the town were smeared with tar. October 15th, 1935 saw a blood libel initiated against the Jews. As a result, two were injured and thirty-nine windows in Jewish homes were broken. On November 11th, 1936 one Jew was murdered and thirty-three sustained injuries at the hands of Lithuanian neighbours and peasants at the town fair.

These events and the worsening economic situation resulted in many Vorne Jews emigrating to South Africa, South America and Australia. Some chose *Eretz-Yisrael*; these were the youngsters of the Zionist camp. One such Zionist was Mordecai Ish-Shalom (the son of the founder of *Heder Metukan*); he organized the *HeHalutz* branch in Vorne. He was one of the first stonecutters in *Eretz-Yisrael* and later became the mayor of Jerusalem.

Several young Jewish people joined the Communist party; a few of these were arrested for their subversive activities and were imprisoned in the detention camp outside town.

Besides the *HeHalutz* branch, there were also many other Zionist youth organizations, including *HaShomer HaTsair*. Zionist and sports activities were also organized by the local *Maccabi* branch. Almost all the Zionist parties had supporters. In the table below we can see how Vorne Zionists voted during five Zionist congresses:

Cong No.	Year	Tot Shek	Total votes	Labor Party		Rev	Gen Zion		Gros	Miz
				Z'S	Z'Z		A	B		
15	192 7	38	29	5	10	1	6	---	---	7
16	192 9	45	27	2	6	---	12	---	---	7
17	193 1	62	49	7	13	7	9	---	---	13
18	193 3	---	77	59		4	9	---	---	5
19	193 5	---	249	127		---	58	---	---	64

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

Rabbis who served during this period in Vorne included;

Ya'akov son of Zevulun Abramovitz (1880 – 1937), from 1925 – 1937,

Aba Shur (1909 - 1941), the last rabbi of Vorne, who was murdered in the Holocaust.

Among the personages born in Vorne were:

Boris-Zalman-Dov Shatz (1866 – 1932) emigrated to *Eretz-Yisrael* in 1906. He was an artist – a painter and a sculptor – and founded the *Betsalel* School of Arts in Jerusalem. He died in Colorado, in the USA.

Mosheh Dov Magid, born in 1901: from 1934 he lived in *Eretz-Yisrael* and was a member of the *Mizrahi* center and of the Municipal Council of Tel Aviv.

Zalman-Pinhas Nathans (1893 - ?), arrived in America as a young man, graduated at New York University and was a teacher of mathematics and physics in New York high schools. He published “Nathan’s Popular Explanation of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity” (NY, 1931) in Yiddish. In the 1930’s he lived in New Rochelle, New York.

Ya'akov-David Kamzon (1900 – 1980), lived in Jerusalem from 1926. A writer and poet in Yiddish and Hebrew, he published his book *Jerusalem* and many children’s books; in 1959 published the book *Yahaduth Lita* with many photos of Jewish communities in Lithuania (Publisher *Mosad HaRav Kook*, Jerusalem).

During World War II

In June 1940, Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union and became a Soviet Republic. Significant changes in social, economic, cultural and educational life affected the Vorne Jews. Following the new rules, the larger shops and enterprises

were nationalized. All the Zionist parties and youth organizations were disbanded and the Hebrew educational institutions were closed. The supply of goods decreased and, as a result, prices soared. The middle class, mostly Jewish, bore the brunt and the standard of living dropped gradually.

On June 25th, 1941, three days after the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Germany, the German army entered Vorne. Before the soldiers of the Red Army in Vorne retreated, they set the arms warehouses on fire. As a result, the synagogue and most of the homes in town burned down. Some of the Jews found temporary quarters in Jewish homes in neighboring towns. When they returned, they found the town destroyed by fire and under the rule of local nationalist Lithuanians, who were conducting a witch-hunt against Soviet activists. In particular, they focused their evil intentions on their former Jewish neighbours and abused and eventually murdered those whom they suspected of pro-Soviet activity. The remaining Jews were forced into hard labor, cleaning debris, sweeping the streets and more.

At the beginning of July, all Jews were ordered to go to the village of Viesvenai, about 25km (15 miles) from Vorne. The adults walked, the aged and the children rode in carts. In Viesvenai, the Vorne Jews together with others from surrounding areas were herded into barns, stables and cowsheds. They were supervised by armed Lithuanians. After several days of maltreatment, on July 16th, 1941, the men were shot and buried in a mass grave. The women and children were sent to Geruliai village near Telz. There, they were murdered on August 30th (7th of Elul, 5701). On December 24th, 1941 (4th of Teveth, 5702) several girls who had been temporarily employed by farmers of the area and in Telz, were put to death.

Only a few managed to escape and survive.

In 1989 only 6 Jews lived in Vorne.

Sources

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Ish-Shalom M., *BeSod Hotzvim Ubonim* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 5741 (1981)

Elitsur Sarah, *Biyeri UBamistarim* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 5746 (1986)

Milner M., *Me'Eiver LaKav HaHayim* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1981

Fridman Sh.Z., *BeDarhei HaRuakh*, Jerusalem, 1980

Di Tsait (Yiddish), Kovno, 6.5.1924

Masines Zudynes Lietuvoje (Lithuanian) (Mass Murder in Lithuania), Vol.II, page 41

Naujienos (Lithuanian) Chicago, 11.6.1949

Appendix 1

List of 127 Vorne Jewish donors to The Settlement of *Eretz-Yisrael*

(From Jewishgen.org>Databases>Lithuania>HaMelitz Compiled by Jeffrey Maynard).

Surname	Given Name	Comments	Source in Hamelitz	Year
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AIZIKMAN	Aizik	#108	1900
ARONOWITZ	Shmuel Meir	#108	1900
BALNIK	Yitzchok	#132	1898
BALNIK	Yitzchok	#108	1900
BALNIK	Yitzchok	#23	1901
BATZFON	Leib	#23	1901
BATZFON	Lev	#204	1895
BATZFON	Yehuda Leib	#132	1898
BERMAN	Tzvi	#132	1898
BORSHTTEIN	Moshe	#132	1898
BROIDA	Zev	#132	1898
BROIDA	Zev	#23	1901
CHAIMOWITZ	Ezriel	#151	1898
CHAIMOWITZ	Ezriel Yitzchok	#132	1898
CHAIMOWITZ	Gershon related to Nochum Shlomo Chaimowitz from Taurage #247 1895		
CHAMERDIL	Shaul Yehuda	#108	1900
CHANANIE	Beile Rochel bas Nochum	#23	1901
CHANANIE	Beinish	#23	1901
CHANANIE	Nochum Lipman	#23	1901
DIMANT	Yitzchok	#108	1900
DIMANT	Yitzchok	#23	1901
DOGILEWITZ	Hersh	#23	1901
DOGILOWITZ	Yehoshua	#108	1900
DOMBE	Zelig Leib	#132	1898
EPHRIN	Yisroel	#132	1898
FRIDMAN	Bentzion	#108	1900
	Bentzion b-i-l of Leah		
FRIDMAN	Reitzkin, husband of Reitze	#23	1901
FRIDMAN	Reitze, wife of Bentzion	#23	1901
GODON	Yeshiyahu	#23	1901
GOLDING	Chaim	#23	1901
GOLDSHTEIN	Dovid, husband of Leah Reitzkin	#23	1901
	Wed 5 Kislev in Manchester,UK		
GOLDSHTEIN	Meir	#108	1900
GOLEMBA	Yisroel	#23	1901

GOLUMBA	Yisroel		#185	1895
GRAF	Meir		#132	1898
GRIN	Meir	Shub	#132	1898
GRIN	Meir	Shub	#108	1900
GROF	Meir		#23	1901
GROZ	Yitzchok		#132	1898
GUTMAN	Chaim ben Tzvi Eliahu		#132	1898
HAGNI	Beila		#108	1900
HAGNI	Binyomin Beinish		#108	1900
HAGNI	Moshe		#108	1900
HILLEL	Yakov		#132	1898
KATZ	Raphel Shabasai		#108	1900
KATZ	Yakov Hillel		#108	1900
KATZ	Yisroel		#108	1900
KATZ	Zalman Yitzchok		#132	1898
KAMZOHN	Meir		#132	1898
KATZ	Zalman Yakov		#108	1900
KLOP	Yakov		#108	1900
KOZNITZKI	Yakov		#108	1900
KWEINGIL	Meir		#23	1901
LEIK	Ephraim Eliezer		#108	1900
LEW	Yehuda Leib		#108	1900
LEWI	Yakov Elchanan	Shatz	#108	1900
LEWIN	Yakov Elchanan	Shatz	#132	1898
LEWITAN	Chaim Meir		#132	1898
LIBZOHN	Don Arie		#23	1901
LICHT	Binyomin		#132	1898
LICHT	Ephraim Eliezer		#132	1898
LICHT	Zalkind		#132	1898
LICHT	Zalkind		#108	1900
LIN	Tzvi		#23	1901
LURIA	Dovid		#132	1898
LURIA	Nachum		#132	1898
LURIA	Nochum		#23	1901
LURIA	Yakov		#108	1900

MAGID	Beinish	#23	1901
MAGID	Binyomin Beinish	#108	1900
MARIK	Dovid	#132	1898
MARIK	Yosef	#23	1901
MELAMED	Shimon Yehuda	#108	1900
NADIL	Tzemach Dovid	#108	1900
NAWAITZ	Mordechai Eliezer	#108	1900
NOWITZ	Mordechai	#132	1898
OLSHWANGER	Aharon	#108	1900
OLSHWANGER	Eli	#132	1898
OLSHWANGER	Ezriel	#132	1898
OLSHWANGER	Ezriel	#108	1900
OLSHWANGER	Ezriel	#23	1901
OSHROWITZ	Peretz	#132	1898
PIL	Ephraim	#132	1898
POHINSKI	Menucha	#108	1900
POLINSKI	Chaim	#108	1900
POSHINSKI	Chaim	#23	1901
POSHINSKI	Miriam	#23	1901
PRINGEL	Tzvi	#108	1900
PUSHANSKI	Chaim	#23	1901
PUSHINSKI	Chaim	#132	1898
RADALIE	Avraham Dov	#132	1898
REINES	Shneur	#132	1898
REITZKIN	Eliezer brother of Leah & Sheine Feige	#23	1901
REITZKIN	Leah sister of Eliezer & Sheine wife of Dovid Goldshtein. Wed 5 Kislev in Manchester, UK	#23	1901
REITZKIN	Sheine Feige sister of Eliezer & Leah	#23	1901
ROSTENBERG	Dovid	#108	1900
ROSTOWSKI	Gitl wife of Chaim Gutman Wed in Varniai from Kelme	#123	1897
ROT	Aharon Leib	#108	1900
ROTTENBERG	Dovid	#132	1898
ROZ	Dov Moshe	#132	1898
ROZENTHAL	Tzvi Yehuda	#132	1898

ROZINSHTEIN	Zev	#108	1900
SEGAL	Dov	#132	1898
SEGAL	Aizik	#23	1901
SEGAL	Dovid	#108	1900
SEGAL	Dovid	#23	1901
SHAIBET	Yakov	#23	1901
SHEFTIL	Yehoshua	#108	1900
SHER	Aharon	#132	1898
SHER	Tzvi Menachem	#132	1898
SHER	Yitzchok	#108	1900
SHMIDT	Dovid	#132	1898
SHNITZ	Moshe	#108	1900
SHNITZ	Moshe	#23	1901
SHOCHAT	Shimon	#132	1898
SROL	Yakov Zev	#108	1900
TALPIOT	Avraham uncle of Leah Reitzkin	#23	1901
TZIN	Aharon	#132	1898
TZIN	Eli	#108	1900
TZIN	Eli	#23	1901
TZIN	Eliahu	#132	1898
ZAK	Dov Ari	#108	1900
ZAZINSHTEIN	Zev	#23	1901
	Shaul Yehuda	#132	1898
	Yosef ben Zelig	#132	1898
	Yosef Zev	#108	1900