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# Summary Report on the Condition of Jewish Cemeteries in Latvia

Samuel D. Gruber, Dr., *Syracuse University*



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РИЖСКАЯ ЕВРЕЙСКАЯ ОБЩИНА - МУЗЕЙ «ЕВРЕИ В ПАТВИИ»



**MEJERS MELERS**  
**EBREJU KAPSĒTAS LATVIJĀ**

**MEYER MELER**  
**JEWISH CEMETERIES IN LATVIA**

**МЕЙЕР МЕЛЕР**  
**ЕВРЕЙСКИЕ КПАДБИЩА В ПАТВИИ**



RĪGA 2006  
РИГА 2006

# SUMMARY REPORT OF THE CONDITION OF JEWISH CEMETERIES IN LATVIA

## General Site Descriptions

The majority of Jewish cemeteries in Latvia were established in the 19th and 20th centuries, although 14 of the 58 cemeteries surveyed were established during the 18th century. The cemetery in Ludza is one of the oldest in the country, officially dating from the beginning of 18th century (around 1722). The second oldest cemetery is located in Piltene. The cemetery in Rīga was established in 1725. The new cemetery in Jēkabpils was established after World War II. Most cemeteries are still identifiable, but five cemeteries (in Valdemārpils, Valmiera, Grobiņa, and two in Bauska) were "liquidated" in 1941–1942; all the tombstones were removed and sold leaving nothing but unmarked fields today. Six other cemeteries have also had all tombstones removed. This occurred during the Soviet period in the 1970s (in Dubulti, Rīga, Rūjiena, and especially Kuldīga) and happened not only to Jewish cemeteries but to other cemeteries as well.

Hasidic or Mitnagdim Orthodox Jews used the majority of cemeteries surveyed, while the cemeteries in Daugavpils and Liepāja were used by Sephardim Jewish communities, which were very few.

All the cemeteries are on urban or suburban sites except six (Balvi, Višķi, Gostiņi, Demene, Rūjiena, and Embūte), which are rural. Thirty-one cemeteries are located on flat land, five are located on hillsides, and 11 are located on the crown of a hill. Nine cemeteries are located near rivers and lakes, including those that no longer exist. All but four (Daugavpils, Auce, Kuldīga, and the new Liepāja cemetery) of the cemetery sites are isolated from other (non-Jewish) municipal burial sites, although seven of the cemeteries adjoin other cemeteries. Embūte's cemetery is located at a crossroads outside the village; it is unusual in that its location was chosen to serve several surrounding Jewish communities, even though Embūte itself had no Jewish population.

Only nine of the cemeteries had been marked by signs or inscriptions of any sort (Aizpute, Daugavpils, Liepāja, Rēzekne, Jelgava, Varakļāni, two in Rīga, one in Jēkabpils). All are accessible by public roads and open to the public except for the ceme-

tery in Balvi, Demene, and Lejasciems, which are on private property. Only eight cemeteries (Daugavpils, Krāslava, Valka, Ventspils, Varakļāni, one in Rīga, two in Jēkabpils) are surrounded by continuous walls or fences, and only the cemetery in Daugavpils, Jēkabpils (Asote), Krāslava, Rēzekne, and Rīga have gates that lock.

## Appearance and Condition

Only one cemetery (in Rīga) has more than 5,000 tombstones — all believed to be in their original locations and in good condition (upright, not broken). Three cemeteries have 500–5,000 stones (Daugavpils, Liepāja, Rēzekne); 16 cemeteries have 100–500; nine have 20–100 tombstones, and nine others have 1–10 tombstones that are visible.

Eight cemeteries have no stones visible; for six of these the location of the stones is not known. In one case (Krustpils), it is known that the stones were moved to another cemetery, and in another case (Valdemārpils), it is known that seven stones were moved to private property.

Of the Jewish cemeteries with stones remaining, only five are thought to have all their stones standing and unbroken — the new cemetery in Rīga and the cemeteries in Auce, Zilupe, Kuldīga, and Ludza. All other cemeteries contain damaged stones: eight cemeteries have under 25 percent of their stones broken or toppled, nine cemeteries have 25–50 percent of their tombstone broken or toppled; six cemeteries have 50–75 percent of their stones damaged, and 12 other cemeteries with the most serious damage have more than 75 percent of their tombstones toppled or broken.

Excessive vegetation creates problems in most of the cemeteries; 27 out of 58 surveys cited vegetation overgrowth as a constant problem, disturbing graves and in many cases disturbing and damaging stones. Ten cemeteries also have seasonal problems with water drainage.

Most of the cemeteries are dedicated solely to the use of a Jewish cemetery; however, a few cemetery sites are used for other purposes. The Jewish cemetery site at Dobeles is now used for residential purposes. The sites in Kuldīga, Gostini, Kandava, and Rūjiena have become overgrown by woods

In Valmiera, the mixed Christian cemetery has spread to the Jewish site, meaning that Christians are being buried directly over Jewish graves. In Kuldīga, Riga, and Rūjiena, the cemeteries have been turned into parks.

## Tombstones and Markers

Thirteen cemeteries have tombstone with traces of painting on their surfaces. This is a relatively rare find, and measures to protect selected examples should be considered. Six cemeteries have tombstones with portraits on them, probably enameled photographs, a 20th century custom. Inscriptions on tombstones are in Hebrew, Yiddish, and in some places German, Russian, or Latvian. Twelve cemeteries contain memorial monuments to Holocaust victims (Daugavpils, Krāslava, Liepāja, Preiļi, Subate, Jaunjelgava, Dagda, Zilupe, both Jēkabpils cemeteries, Rēzekne, the new cemetery in Rīga). In Krāslava and Rīga there are also monuments to the soldiers from World War II, and in Auce — two tombstones to soldiers of the First World War. Liepāja's cemetery contains monuments to Jewish soldiers from the First and Second World Wars.

Nine of the cemeteries surveyed are known to contain mass graves. Jaunjelgava, Dagda, Daugavpils, Embūte, Varakļāni, Jēkabpils, the new cemetery in Rīga have marked mass graves of Holocaust victims.

## Structures

Four cemeteries contain the pre-burial houses (in Rēzekne, which was severely damaged and razed, in Rīga and Tukums, and in Jaunjelgava, which is destroyed). The pre-burial house in Tukums is now used as a residential house. Riga's cemetery also includes *okhels* (small houses over the grave), under which lie the remains of several well known Jews and rabbis. Information provided indicates that there are *ohels* in the cemeteries of Varakļāni, Daugavpils, Krāslava, Tukums, and Jaunjelgava as well.

## Ownership and Landmark Status

With five exceptions, the local municipalities own all Latvian Jewish cemeteries. (The cemeteries in Balvi, Demene, and Lejasciems are privately owned; the Jewish community owns Jelgava's cemetery, and the ownership of Grīva's cemetery is not known). Only two

cemeteries — in Rēzekne and Preiļi — are designated as protected historic or cultural sites. It is not clear why only these two cemeteries have received protection as cultural landmarks. The local schools have been involved with the restoration of Preiļi's cemetery, although now it is overgrown. The official recognition of Rēzekne's cemetery may have to do with its size (500—5,000 stones), the involvement of the local community (Jewish and non-Jewish). Perhaps most important, Rēzekne's population was 25.4 percent Jewish before World War II, and the city was developed by prominent Jewish families.

### **Vandalism**

Most cemeteries surveyed have been vandalized at some point. Many were destroyed during World War II, but at least 17 cemeteries were vandalized later. Five cemeteries have been vandalized in the last 20 years (Rēzekne, Skaistkalne, Cēsis, the old Liepāja cemetery, the new Rīga cemetery).

### **Care and Restoration**

Only 24 of the 58 cemeteries surveyed have been maintained or restored in any noticeable manner. Of the 24 cemeteries that have received care, at least eight are still in use (in Rēzekne, Jēkabpils, Rīga, Daugavpils, Krāslava, Liepāja, Ludza, and Valka) and receive at least occasional maintenance, mainly the clearing of vegetation. Five of these (Liepāja, Ludza, Rēzekne, Daugavpils, and Rīga) have regular caretakers. The cemeteries in Zilupe, Varakļāni, and Krāslava also have regular caretakers. The cemetery in Valka (still used), which is near the Estonian border, receives continuous

maintenance from Estonian Jewish groups. The two cemeteries in Jēkabpils (one old cemetery and one still in use) have received more extensive care and restoration that has included re-erecting and cleaning stones, patching broken stones, clearing vegetation, and fixing the wall. This restoration work has been done recently (1999—2000 and ongoing) and is the result of work done by the local Jewish community. In Piltene, some restoration work (cleaning and re-erecting stones) was done by German youth during 1992—1994. Local non-Jewish residents have been involved in restoration efforts in Auce. Jewish groups or individuals abroad contributed to the restoration and/or maintenance of the cemeteries in Varakļāni, Liepāja, Rēzekne and Dagda. Individual Latvian Jews assisted with restoration work done at cemeteries in Ventspils, Viļaki, and Jelgava. Jewish community members assisted municipal workers in clearing vegetation at Ludza.

The other 25 cemeteries either receive no maintenance, or, in a few cases, are believed to be beyond considerations of maintenance (i.e., destroyed cemeteries now used for other purposes).

### **Conclusion**

The biggest threat to Latvian cemeteries today appears to be neglect. Vegetation overgrowth has been cited as a significant threat even in cemeteries with regular caretakers. Recent vandalism has been a problem in a few of these locations. A larger number of cemeteries appear to receive little or no attention, either positive or negative. The reason many of these cemeteries are neg-

lected may be because they are located in smaller towns without Jewish communities (most of these cemeteries have had no burials since the Holocaust). Yet the neglect of cultural heritage is also a legacy of the Soviet system, when ethnic identity was suppressed. Recently in Latvia, there have been numerous cases of vandalism, not only in Jewish cemeteries, demonstrating that this is a sharp problem in contemporary Latvian society. Vandalism could be prevented by improved security.

Lack of funds was cited as a reason for neglect of cemeteries. At least one survey (from Jaunjelgava) indicated an interest in collecting funds for restoration. The cemetery is being restored by descendants of U. Schatz.

More could easily be done to commemorate Jewish heritage in Latvia by, at the very least, creating markers or memorials identifying cemetery sites; at this point only nine out of 58 cemeteries have identifying markers or inscriptions. Granting sites protection as cultural landmarks and creating Holocaust memorials could enrich cultural memory, even, and maybe particularly, in areas where the Jewish population was completely wiped out, in some cases drastically changing the make-up of local communities (for instance Gostiņi was more than half Jewish before World War II and now has no Jewish inhabitants). The cemetery of Gostiņi was renovated in 2005. This work was done by the group of Christian youth from Germany, Austria, Holland and Latvia, in Kārsava — for the expense of the descendants of Kārsava Jews. Most of the sites still exist and so could potentially be, if not restored, at least adequately marked and remembered.