

JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ESTONIA

ENGLISH only

SOME HISTORY

- Jewish settlement in Estonia began in the 19th century, when the Jewish people emigrated here from different parts of the Russian empire. In 1913, there were 5,000 Jews living in Estonia – 2,000 lived in Tartu and 1,100 in Tallinn. This is where the largest Jewish synagogues were built.
- At least 200 Estonian Jews fought in the War of Independence (1918-1920) to help establish the new Republic. Once Estonian independence had been achieved, the number of Jewish organisations increased noticeably. The Jewish elementary school in Tallinn was founded already during the War of Independence, in 1919. The Jewish secondary school in Tallinn was founded a few years later, in 1924.
- In 1925, the Act of Cultural Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities was enacted, giving minority groups, consisting of at least 3,000 individuals, the right of self-determination in cultural matters. Financial support was provided by the state. In 1926, Jewish cultural autonomy was declared. For its tolerant policy towards Jews, a page was dedicated to Estonia in the Golden Book of Jerusalem in 1927.
- In the 1930s, there were over 4,300 Jews living in Estonia. There were three Jewish schools and about 100 Jews were studying at the University of Tartu. In 1939, there were 32 different Jewish organisations active in Estonia.
- With the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940, Jewish cultural autonomy, in addition to the activities of Jewish organisations, was terminated. The teaching of Hebrew and lectures on Judaism and Yiddish culture were banned. 414 Estonian Jews (10 per cent of the Jewish Community) were deported to Siberia in June 1941.
- During the German occupation (1941-1944), the Nazis murdered the approximately 1,000 Jews who had failed to flee Estonia (mostly to the Soviet Union).
- During the Soviet era (1944-1991), many Jews migrated to Estonia from other parts of Soviet Union because of the lack of anti-Semitism here. By 1960, 5,500 Jews lived in Estonia, about 80 per cent of them in Tallinn.

More information:

Jewish minority in Estonia: <http://www.einst.ee/factsheets/jews/>

Ethnicity in Estonia:

<http://www.einst.ee/historic/society/ethnicity.htm>

PRESENT

- Currently, the Jewish Community in Estonia consists of about 3,000 people. About 2,000 live in Tallinn and the rest mainly in Tartu, Narva, and Kohtla-Järve.
- After the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, the Jewish Cultural Society was reorganised, and in 1992, the Jewish Community was established. At the Estonian Institute of Humanities it was then possible to teach Hebrew, Judaism, and Yiddish culture. The Tallinn Jewish synagogue was re-opened in 2000.
- The Holocaust is part of the Estonian school curriculum, taught in connection with the events of World War II. The subject is dealt with in several grades (5th and 9th), especially in the modern history course of the 12th grade. The late vice-president of the Jewish Community Eugenia Gurin-Loov published the book "Holocaust" in Estonian. Several sites of Holocaust have been marked and commemorated, for example at Klooga. On 27 January 2003 Estonia marked the first official Holocaust Day.
- Estonia has always condemned all crimes against humanity, including especially Holocaust. In 1998, the President of Estonia convened the International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity. The chairman of this independent Commission is the internationally respected, retired Finnish diplomat Minister Max Jakobson. Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, Paul Goble, Nicholas Lane, Peter Reddaway, Arseny Roginsky and Baron Wolfgang von Stetten participate in the work of the Commission. The Commission investigates crimes against humanity that were committed against Estonian citizens, or on the territory of the Republic of Estonia, during the Nazi and Soviet occupations. The first results of the Commission's investigation, dealing with the crimes committed during the Nazi era, are available to the international public at <http://www.historycommission.ee>. The report of the years 1940-1945 will be published as a book by the end of the year 2003.
- Hebrew and Yiddish literature has been translated into Estonian. The Hebrew Poetry Anthology in Estonian won a translation award for Kristiina Ross.
- The internationally best known Estonian Jewish academic is Juri Lotman (1922 – 1993), the renowned professor of semiotics. There are many well-known persons among the members of the Estonian Jewish Community, e.g. Eri Klas, the world-famous conductor, and Hagi Sein, a member of the Estonian Broadcasting Council.

