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From Neglection, Destruction and Absence towards Preservation: Legacy of Jewish Sepulchral Heritage in Lithuania

For many centuries Jewish communities shaped and influenced the local cityscapes, as well as landscapes, and left deep imprints in the areas they lived in Lithuania. Each organised Jewish community in a Jewish settlement gave the highest priority to the establishment of a prayer house and a separate confessional cemetery. In order to shape the burial plot and establishing a cemetery Jewish communities usually tried to meet and combine both - the religious requirements and the local regulations for cemetery localization. These regulations can be still seen and traced while analyzing localizations of cemeteries.

Unlike other religious groups, which never ceased to create cemeteries, burial grounds and memorials for eternity, Jewish tradition towards death and Jewish cemeteries cardinaly differs and aims to preserve communal cemeteries for as long as it is possible. Since the main fundamental idea of a Jewish burial ground lies in its name - *beit olam* in Hebrew means - the house of eternity. Therefore it makes all clear - the main purpose of any Jewish community is to perpetuate the place of buried ancestors, but what happens to these burial sites when there is no community any more. How such signs and objects of Jewish sepulchral heritage can be read, understood and interpreted nowadays in absence of primary users.

After the Holocaust, when the biggest part of Jewish community of Lithuania were lost, the natural continuation of Jewish cemeteries' maintenance tradition was lost as well, as there were no local Jews in smaller towns after the WWII, even those who came back could not bear the hard moral circumstances to stay and live in the places, which once used to house their families, friends and neighbours. Jewish cultural legacy, including the confessional cemeteries, lost their original creators, caretakers, users, owners and even interpreters of such sites. There are around 200 historical Jewish cemeteries established before the WWII in Lithuania, these are usually direct and easily identified the only tangible memories of Jewish existence in towns and townlets. The current small Jewish community (which numbers less than 5000 Jews) in Lithuania today manages only 2 active Jewish cemeteries: one in the capital - Vilnius, and another in the second largest city - Kaunas. The rest number of pre-

WWII Jewish cemeteries of Lithuania are managed by the local municipalities and local people, which are not familiar with Jewish traditions.

Neglect, destruction, debasement and devastation of Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania began during the WWII and has continued until the 1990s and even further. These named effects of different historical periods in Lithuania, such as nazism and sovietization, can still be seen and visually traced researching Jewish cemeteries even today.

The field of Jewish sepulchral heritage in Lithuania has never gained deserved attention and lacks of qualified researchers familiar with Jewish culture and traditions. The absence of broader analysis still leads to following problems, such as: the exact number and identification/localization of pre-WWII Jewish burial sites is not formalized/finalised, which would decrease potential desecration of such sites in the future; Jewish sepulchral heritage management and evaluation is insufficient; Jewish cemeteries and sepulchral heritage is still not engaged topic in educational agenda; systematic approach and cultural policy preserving and evaluating Jewish sepulchral heritage is not clear and has no guidelines; the lack of analysis of funeral Jewish art of Jewish sepulchral heritage is also still an open field for researchers.

The thesis focus on a detailed look at the Jewish Sepulchral heritage and it's legacy in the context of nowadays Lithuanian cultural heritage preservation, protection and management and what kind of challenges occur while perceiving, representing and preserving Jewish cemeteries and Jewish sepulchral heritage in Lithuania.