Kopcheve (Kapciamiestis)
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Kopcheve is located in the south-western corner of Lithuania, about 8 km (5 miles) from Poland and the same distance from Belarus, in an area full of rivers, lakes and woods. The river Baltoji Ancia and the nearby rivers Juodoji Ancia and Nieda flow through Kopcheve.

The origins of this town can be traced to the middle of the fifteenth century, then a small village, owned by the secretary of the Great Prince Kazimir (1427-1492).

Until 1795 Kopcheve was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom, when the third division of Poland by the three superpowers of those times - Russia, Prussia and Austria — resulted in Lithuania becoming partly Russian and partly Prussian. The part of the state which lay on the left side of the Neman river (Nemunas), including Kopcheve, was handed over to Prussia which ruled there during the years 1795-1807. During these years Kopcheve was a county center.

After Napoleon defeated Prussia and according to the Tilzit agreement of July 1807, Polish territories occupied by Prussia were transferred to what became known as the "The Great Dukedom of Warsaw", which was established at that time. The King of Sachsonia, Friedrich-August, was appointed Duke, and the Napoleonic code now became the constitution of the Dukedom, according to which everybody was equal before the law, except for Jews who were not granted any civil rights.

During the years 1807-1813, Kopcheve belonged to the "Great Dukedom of Warsaw" and was part of the Bialystok district. The Napoleonic code was then introduced in this region, remaining in effect even during the Lithuanian period.

In 1815, after the defeat of Napoleon, all of Lithuania was annexed to Russia, as a result of which Kopcheve was included in the Augustowa Region (Gubernia), and in 1866 it became a part of the Suwalki Gubernia as a county center.

During the years of its existence Kopcheve suffered from many fires.

Being located at the junction of several main roads it was possible for Kopcheve to maintain markets and big fairs.

In 1915 the German army occupied the town and ruled there till 1918 when the independent Lithuanian state was established. In 1919, after fighting the Polish army, Kopcheve remained inside the border of Lithuania, but Seiny, the district center, was included in Poland. The district institutions, called the Seiny district, were transferred to Lazdey, but the town remained a county center only for all the years of independent Lithuania (1918-1940).

Jewish Settlement till World War II.

Jews began to settle in Kopcheve apparently at the end of the eighteenth century, making their living from small shops, crafts, as in most of the towns of the Suwalki Gubernia, and also managed to acquire big plots of land and to pursue agriculture.

In 1897 its population counted 1,314 people, of them 528 Jews.

Kopcheve was known for its scholars and intelligent people. Jewish children studied in a "Cheder", including "Gemara" (Talmud), as well as Hebrew in its curriculum.

A list of donors who helped Jews suffering from hunger in 1871, mentions a Kopcheve Jew, as published in the Hebrew periodical "HaMagid". A list of donors for "The Settlement of Eretz Israel", published in"HaMeilitz" in 1899 and 1903, mentions many Kopcheve Jews. Their representative was Ben-Zion Shimshelevitz. More Kopcheve Jews appear in a list in 1909: B.Shimshelevitz, Leib

Kopchovsky, Yitskhak Kopchovsky, Yakov Mentsin, Sh.Goritsky. "Agudath-Israel" had 50 members in 1913, and Rabbi Tsvi-Aryeh Luria, B"Z. Shimshelevitz, Nisan Menchinsky served on its committee.

In 1918, after World War I, Lithuania became an independent state, and according to the autonomy law for minorities issued by the new Lithuanian government, the minister for Jewish affairs Dr. Max Soloveitshik, in the summer of 1919, ordered that elections be held for community committees in all towns of the state, and a committee consisting of five members was also elected in Kopcheve,. It was active till the end of 1925 when the autonomy was annulled. During its existence the committee collected taxes as required by law, and was in charge of almost all aspects of community life, mainly the registration of births, marriages and deaths.

According to the first census of 1923, there were then 835 people in Kopcheve, of them 187 Jews (22%).

During the period of independent Lithuania (1918-1940), Kopcheve Jews made their living from commerce and crafts, but almost every family had a small plot near their houses on which they grew vegetables and fruits. Three families who owned land and plantations dealt with agriculture (Kopchovsky, Smolsky, Pochtiva). In the 1930s Tsvi-Hirsh Kopchovsky was the chairman of a public committee for the reparcellation of agricultural lands in the county.

According to the 1931 survey of the Lithuanian government, Kopcheve had seven shops, all in Jewish hands: 3 textile, 2 butchers, 1 grocery and 1 pharmacy. According to the same survey there were 2 Jewish owned flour mills, one of them (owned by Miler) powered by water on the river Nieda, which also supplied electricity to the town, as well as 2 mechanical workshops. Grazhevsky had a blacksmith workshop and also a bus which even took passengers to Kovno. Miler traded in timber and owned a metal workshop. The butcher Ofchinsky would purchase cattle in the surroundings for his shop.

In 1937 there were 18 Jewish artisans in town: 5 tailors, 4 blacksmiths, 4 butchers, 2 shoemakers, 1 baker, 1 glazier and 1 stitcher.

By 1939 there were 20 telephone owners, one of them Jewish.

During this period Jewish children studied in a private Hebrew elementary school. Several graduates of this school continued their studies in the nearby Hebrew high schools or in Kovno. There was also a library and a dramatic circle.

The Zionist movement with all its parties was quite popular in Kopcheve, as can be seen from election results to Zionist congresses in the table below:

Congress Nr.	Year	Total Shkalim	Total Voters	Labor Party Z"S .....Z"Z		Revisionists	Gen. Zionists A ..... B		Grosmanists	Mizrakhi
15	1927	13	13	--	--	--	13	--	--	--
16	1929	27	15	15	--	--	--	--	--	--
17	1931	24	12	1	1	--	10	--	--	--
18	1933	---	42	38		--	4	--	--	--
19	1935	65	59	30		--	26	--	--	3
21	1939	32	31	20			7	--	3	1

The Zionist youth organization "Gordonia" with 30-40 members was active in Kopcheve

The "Gordonia" branch of Kopcheve 1933

First line above, standing from right: Hofman, Meir Kliuk, Sarah Fridkovsky, Nekhemia Kviatkovsky, Khaya-Liba--?--, Khaya Lev, Iser Lev, Roni Smolsky, Leibke Kviatkovsky, Frida Miler, Yehudah Fridkovsky

Second line from right: Bath-Sheva Otrembsky, (below her-half face) **Leah Fridkovsky,** (fourth) **Nekhama Kliuk,** (the sixth) **Khaya Kviatkovsky, Sarah-Ela Hofman**

Lower line sitting from right: (fourth) **Meir Lantsman,** (seventh) **teacher of the Hebrew school,** (last) **David Otrembsky.**

Among the local Rabbis who served in Kopcheve were Avraham-Tsvi-Pinkhas Eliashberg (1864-1943), in Kopcheve 1887-1900; Tsvi-Aryeh-Leib Luria (1871-?), in Kopcheve 1902-1913; Meir Stolevitz (1871- ?), from 1942 Rabbi in Jerusalem; Menakhem-Mendel Sher, in Kopcheve from 1938, murdered in 1941.

Locally born personalities included the historian Elkhanan (Eduard) Kalman (1891-1939); B"Z. Shimshelevitz, scholar and ardent Zionist, who published articles in "HaOlam", an uncle of the second president of Israel - Yitskhak ben Tsvi; Dr. Yitskhak Kopchovsky, (born 1922) economist, later to be deputy director and member of the directorate of Bank Leumi LeIsrael.

During World War II and afterwards

World War II started with the German invasion of Poland on the 1st of September 1939, and its consequences for Lithuanian Jews in general and Kopcheve Jews in particular were felt several months later.

In accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty on the division of occupied Poland, the Russians occupied the Suwalki region, but after delineation of exact borders between Russia and Germany, the Suwalki region fell into German hands. The retreating Russians allowed anyone who wanted to join them to move into their occupied territory, and indeed many young people left the area together with the Russians. The Germans drove the remaining Jews out of their homes in Suwalki and its vicinity, robbed them of their possessions, then directed them to the Lithuanian border, where they were left in dire poverty. The Lithuanians did not allow them to enter Lithuania and the Germans did not allow them to return. Thus they stayed in this swampy area in cold and rain for several weeks, until Jewish

youths from the border villages smuggled them into Lithuania by various routes, with much risk to themselves. Altogether about 2,400 refugees passed through the border or infiltrated on their own, and were then dispersed in the "Suwalkia" region.

In June 1940 Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union and became a Soviet Republic. Following new rules, a large Jewish house whose area was more than 220 meters (about 2000 square feet) was nationalized and its owners — the Fridkovsky family - forced to leave. All Zionist parties and youth organizations were disbanded and Hebrew educational institutions were closed.

Supply of goods decreased and, as a result, prices soared. The middle class, mostly Jewish, bore most of the brunt, and the standard of living dropped gradually.

The German army entered Kopcheve on the first day of the war, June 22nd 1941. Only a few Jews who tried to escape managed to get to Russia and survive. With the entry of the Germans, Lithuanian nationalist gangs started to rampage and to abuse the Jews. Jews' life and property were outside the law and everybody could do with them as they wished. Jews were forced to perform degrading jobs, being humiliated all the time.

Testimony of Rivkah and Ze'ev Mikhnovsky

On the fifteenth of September 1941, all Kopcheve Jews were transferred to Lazdey under heavy guard and put into the Katkiske Ghetto, about one and a half km from Lazdijai. There the Jews from Lazdijai, Rudamin, Vishey, Kopcheve and small settlements of the surroundings had been concentrated. They were placed in army barracks according to families, and the entire area was surrounded by barbed wire and armed Lithuanian guards. Daily task groups were used for work outside the compound.

Initially, each person was given 200 grams of unsalted bread and 300 grams of potatoes. Gradually the rations were cut down, and an epidemic of dysentery broke out. People suffered and starved. Some sneaked out and ran to nearby villages where they exchanged personal belonging for food or begged for food. Some relief occurred when some of the local farmers were allowed to engage Jews as workers on their farms, provided that they would return them to the ghetto at night. Those who eat at the farms would give up their share of the food in the ghetto so that others could benefit from it.

The internal arrangements of the work schedule were conducted by the Jewish managed Arbeits Amt (Work Office). A special committee to manage all affairs of the ghetto was created from representatives of all the communities, and the Koptcheve pharmacist Astromsky was their leader. He did not do a thing without consulting with Rabbi Gershtein of Lazdijai. A Jewish police force was organized in the ghetto but had very little authority.

Every gentile was able to do whatever he pleased and hardly a day passed without some torture or criminal act. For example, a Lithuanian policeman once took a liking to the boots of Yehoshua Vilensky from Rudamin. He called him over, shot him dead, and took his boots.

One day the ghetto was shocked by the secret news Sheina Idovitz and Golda Katorovsky related upon their return from work on Monday, October 27th. Every day they were taken to the town to work for the German commander. That day, they heard a conversation between the commandant of Mariampol, who screamed at the commandant of Lazdijai what a terrible shame it was that his Jews were still alive. The commandant from Lazdijai apologized and explained that he needed the Jews who were doing necessary work and many of the essential crafts. The commandant from Mariampol screamed again, "You have to fulfill your task or otherwise you will be sent to the front" where upon the commandant of Lazdijai replied, "I am a soldier and a man of war, and you won't scare me with this kind of threat.'

The mood in the ghetto was instantaneously electrified. The sounds of death shook people and scared them in anticipation of the following day. That night some people escaped from the ghetto and went looking for a hideaway with the farmers or in the fields. A few days later, however, when no special events had occurred, everything returned to normal. They expected that the commandant would continue to protect the Jews under his control. By the end of October, most of the Jews throughout

Lithuania had already been murdered, while those of Lazdijai were among some of the very few still left alive.

On Thursday, October 30, 1941, the ghetto was sealed and nobody was taken out to work. They were able to see the murderous Lithuanians walking in the distance with spades in their hands. Upon asking the chief of the police as to the meaning of this scene, he responded nonchalantly, "They are going to dig pits for you. This will take a few days and that is exactly the length of time left for you to be alive." After that explanation, many attempted to run away even though the place was well guarded by armed guards. The following morning, escapees were returned to the camp, some wounded and some murdered, and the chief of police came to calm the Jews. He told them that running away did not make sense since everywhere the German foot walks the Jew gets wiped off the face of the earth. He went on to say that a Jew can never find a hiding place from the bullet marked for him, and that very soon the end would come for all Jews wherever they might be.

The Lithuanians sealed all windows and doors to the barracks with planks and metal bars, and the Jews stayed locked up without water or food. Despite all their efforts, 180 people managed to escape from the barracks during the first two nights.

On Monday, November 3, 1941 (the 13th of Marcheshvan, 5702), the Jews were taken naked from the barracks to the pits about 300 meters away from the barracks and about 300 meters west of the forest. About 1600 souls were shot to death. Not one person managed to escape. Although the Germans gave the orders for the "operation", they participated only as observers at the scene of the crime, the actual executioners were Lithuanians. A gang of apparently experienced murderers from Mariampol also participated in the executions. This gang seemed experienced because of their previous actions, and later refused the Germans' offer to photograph them in order to "memorialize" their actions. Only in December of 1941 did the first signs of the German's retreat and defeat appear, when the Germans were forced back into winter defensive positions.

Picture supplied by Ruth ben David

Sign on the road saying: Place of the mass murders of the Jews in 1941 at Katkishke

As mentioned earlier, many Jews escaped before the slaughter, some being badly wounded, caught, and brought back to the ghetto. On the day of the slaughter, they were dragged with the other sick and helpless to the pits. Many of the escapees were killed by the farmers. After a while, the Lithuanians stopped murdering the captured escapees and incarcerated them instead. When the number of those captured reached 35, they took them to the mass graves and murdered them there.

Of the entire 180 who escaped, only 6 survived the war: Rivka (Gershtein) Mikhnovsky and her husband Ze'ev Mikhnovsky, Dov Zef, Miriam Kuleisky and her sisters Gita and Bat-Sheva Koifman - all from Lazdijai; Khmilevsky from Vishey; Gedalia Cohen from Rudamin.

In 1944 and 1945, the Soviets recaptured Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, and they became Soviet republics again. After the war a monument was erected on the mass graves. The tablet on it was changed in the nineties.

Picture taken by Ruth ben David 1994
Entrance gate to the site of the mass graves at Katkishke
The monument in the background

The monument on the mass graves
Picture taken by Ruth ben David 1994
The Monument at Katkishke

The tablet of the Monument.

The inscription in Lithuanian and Yiddish: At this place the Hitlerist murderers with their local helpers on the 3rd of November 1941 murdered 1535 Jews from Lazdijai district, men, women, children

The Fridkovsky sisters survived thanks to two Lithuanian peasants, Zharnauskas and Levulis. After the German retreat they were murdered by Lithuanian nationalists for saving the Jewish girls.

Photo supplied by Yehudah Fridkovsky

Fulgentas Luvelis and his daughter Nida - the son and granddaughter of the murdered rescuer of the Fridkovsky sisters at the Jewish cemetery in Kopcheve. Behind them Yehudah Fridkovsky

For the list of Kopcheve Jews, as compiled by Yehudah Fridkovsky, see <u>Appendix I below</u>.

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Appendix I
List of Kopcheve Jews

*--murdered at Katkishke
Blumental Mordekhai * house owner
Blumental Ya'akov died in Israel
Lev Khana house wife, died in Israel
Lev Iser printing press owner in Canada
Lev Khaya house wife, lives in Israel
Vodnitsky Alter * restaurant owner
Otrembsky David ???
Otrembsky Bath-Sheva ???
Ovchinsky Berl * blacksmith
Garbarsky Fishke * shoemaker
Garbarsky Sender *
---------------------- * nickname: farber, owner of paint shop
-----------**Khaya-Libe *** his daughter
-----------**Esther *** his daughter
-----------**Feivke *** grain storehouse
-----------**Avraham ***
-----------**Moshe-Ber *** retired
----------------------- * a Jewish family, shop owners near the church
Yasinsky Mikhael restaurant owner, died in Israel
Yasinsky Masha house wife
Yasinsky Ela son
Yasinsky Leah daughter
Yasinsky Ronith daughter , lives in Israel
Yasinsky Leibke son, lives in Israel
Yasinsky Aharon driver, died in Israel
Lantsman Moshe butcher
Lantsman Aizik butcher
Smolsky Moshe * shokhet
Smolsky Feige * house wife
Smolsky Ronith
Pik Aharon * blachsmith
Pik David *
Ribak Leib *
Ribak Shmerke *

Krinsky Nekhemia *
Miler Shlomo * workshop and flour mill owner
Miler Moshe * son of Shlomo
Miler Tania daughter
Miler Frida daughter
Kviatkovsky Leib *
Kviatkovsky Nekhemia *
Kviatkovsky Khaya *
Khazanovsky Fruma *
Khazanovsky Shlomo lives abroad
Fridkovsky Leib * shop owner
Fridkovsky Nisan * his son-student
Fridkovsky Rivkah * daughter-shop owner
Fridkovsky Khanah daughter-abroad
Fridkovsky Stirke daughter-abroad
Okunevitz Pesakh * bakery owner
Okunevitz Khaya * house wife
Okunevitz Ya'akov * son
Okunevitz Zekharia * son
Kopchevsky Tsvi-Hirsh agrarian (died in 1934)
Kopchevsky Nadia his wife
Kopchevsky Yitskhak student, lives in Israel
Fridkovsky Yehudah shop owner-lives in Israel
Fridkovsky Yosef died before the war
Fridkovsky Gita died in Russia
Fridkovsky Asher died in Israel
Fridkovsky Khyene lives in Israel
Fridkovsky Sarah died in Israel
Fridkovsky Ben-Zion lives in USA
Fridkovsky Leah lives in Israel
Lantsman Alter *
Lantsman Meir
Lantsman Keile ???
Lantsman Esther-Malka ???
Lantsman Menukhah ???
Lantsman Nekhamah ???
Lantsman Sonia ???
Lantsman Beile ???
Kliuk Meir *
Kliuk Mery * shop owner
Kliuk Nekhama *
Grazhevsky Shmuel * blacksmith
Grazhevsky Moshe *
Grazhevsky Paike *
Grazhevsky Khaim driver- died in Vilna
Hofman Ber-Leib * tailor
Hofman Shlomo *
Hofman Leizer died in Kopcheve after the war
Hofman Sarah-Ela lives in Vilna
Ovchinsky Hirsh * bar owner
Sambursky ------*