

Jewish Belarus

Judaism in Belarus dates back to the 9th century. The Jewish community has made hugely [significant contributions](#) to every stratum of life in these lands.

But by the end of World War II (the Soviet Union's 'Great Patriotic War'), the country's Jewish community had been virtually wiped out as part of Nazi Germany's 'final solution'.

Yet today, small communities that refused to die are beginning to grow and re-establish connections to a heritage and identity that was all but lost. Yiddish can be heard on the streets once more. And all over the country, locals and tourists alike are at last able to visit significant sites that are being actively promoted.

Minsk: re-birth from the ghetto

Between 1941 and 1943, the Minsk Ghetto was one of the largest in occupied Europe. More than 100,000 Jews lived within its confines in the most inhumane of circumstances. Today the **Zaslaŭski Memorial** marks the spot where, on a single day in March 1942, the Nazis murdered 5,000.



Around 500 of the bodies were dumped in the pit that was dug here, an act of barbarity commemorated by the bleak and doleful sculpture of a line of terrified men, women and children descending into the very pit itself. It never fails to profoundly move anyone who visits.

Frieda Wulfovna witnessed life in the ghetto at first hand. An escapee who lived to eventually tell her story, I interviewed her on a grey and snowy morning at the pit of death. [Here is](#) what she told me.

At the [Holocaust Museum and Research Studio](#) nearby, on the site of the old Jewish Quarter, Frieda and the handful of other survivors have made it their life's work to educate and never to forget.

Located in a Jewish house over a hundred years old and opposite the site of a former cemetery, each room houses exhibits that include displays on the lives of individual families, a German military map of the city marking the ghetto boundaries, photographs of the Maly Trascianiec concentration camp on the eastern edge of the city and a memorial to the 33,000 Jews transported here by the Nazis from all over Europe.

Minsk also has a **Museum of Jewish History and Culture** situated on the Minsk Jewish Campus, where more than 10,000 artefacts have been collected for display.

At long last, the state appears to be acknowledging the significance of its Jewish heritage, though a cynic would say this has more to do with the exploitation of an opportunity to promote tourism abroad. Either way, plans are afoot to develop the **memorial complex** on the site of the former concentration camp at Maly Trostenyets, with government funds apparently committed to the project. The **sculpture 'Memory Gate'** on the site is both harrowing and deeply moving.

Brest: a race against time

In 1921 a relief programme initiated by American philanthropist Felix Warburg financed the construction of a new Brest suburb to accommodate homeless Jewish war veterans, their families and orphaned children following the privations of World War I, adjoining a Jewish cemetery established in the 1830s.

By the end of the Nazi occupation in 1944 only 19 Jews remained out of a pre-war community of around 26,000. First the Nazis then the Communists desecrated the cemetery, the gravestones either destroyed or used as hardcore in construction.

During significant building works in recent times, the remaining Warburg houses have been bulldozed one by one. Less than a handful remain. Meanwhile, the digging of foundations for a new supermarket has unearthed hundreds of gravestones.

The small Jewish community here is working tirelessly to preserve all that remains, but the clock is ticking. In Israel, urgent discussions have been held in the Knesset itself. And at present, over 1,200 headstones have been recovered from the building site and are presently stored for safe-keeping under the arches of **Brest hero-fortress**.

The city's tiny but informative **Holocaust Museum** displays a model of the original Warburg suburb. Nearby stands **the bust of Menachem Begin**, the sixth prime minister of Israel, who was born in Brest in 1913.

Unexpectedly, one of the most poignant of the Jewish sites here lies within the curtilage of the **Belarus cinema** in the city centre, the location of the foundation stones of Brest's **original synagogue**. The theatre was actually constructed around it, the shape of the original walls being clearly visible to this day. No plaque acknowledges the significance

of the stones, but row upon row of them can still be inspected in the basement of the cinema.

Viciebsk: a favourite son



This charming and elegant city, renowned for its artistic heritage, has a special claim to fame, for ‘brilliant dreamer’ and surrealist painter **Marc Chagall** lived here for many years. The **house** of his birth (an archetypical eastern European red-brick Jewish home from the late 19th century) has been turned into a delightful **museum**, packed with artefacts telling the story of the artist’s life and of the community into which he was born.

Nearby stands the **Chagall monument** in the old market square of the Jewish quarter, while elsewhere in the city, the splendid [Marc Chagall Museum and Art Centre](#) hosts an impressive collection of 300 original works of art.

Provincial Jewish Belarus: ghosts and voices from the past

All over Belarus traces of Jewish heritage stand ready to be re-claimed, many in ordinary and forgotten locations.

While visiting the outstanding fortress in **Mir**, do not overlook the **Jewish quarter** behind the modest town square.

Only part of the 19th century synagogue remains, though a new one is in the course of construction on an adjacent site. The nearby small but charming **museum** dedicated to the Jewish history of the town easily repays a visit.

The forests around **Navagradak** formed the backdrop to the heroic activities of partisans during World War II (notably the Bielski Brothers, whose exploits are well documented in film and literature). The **museum** in the town houses informative and moving exhibits relating to the fate of the Jewish community during the war and the engagements led by the partisans, which made a huge contribution to the Soviet war effort.



Vetka, a small and sleepy town just 22 kilometres from the country's second city Gomel, hides dark secrets. Behind the locked gates of a farm enterprise on the edge of town stands the privately commissioned **memorial to the Jewish dead** of the district, 200 of whom were murdered in this very location. A mass grave was only discovered during works of excavation at the farm.

Even now, old wounds are being reopened in Vetka. Last year the local newspaper published the names of collaborators who it alleges were involved in the murders. And only recently, building works in the town uncovered the bodies of German soldiers killed in action and buried unacknowledged where they

fell.

Behind a petrol station across town stands the overgrown and unkempt site of the old Jewish cemetery. Formerly the location of over a thousand graves, only a few broken stones and some rusted railings remain. **School Number One** has a superb **museum** devoted to the town's Jewish community and its history.

Footnote

To arrange tours, visits to museums or memorial sites with an English-speaking guide and to meet community members themselves, contact British charity [The Together Plan](#), working with Belarusian NGO **Dialog**. Elsewhere, the objects of London-based foundation [The Belarus Holocaust Memorials Project](#) are dedicated to establishing memorials at each of the 400 known sites of Nazi massacres.

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Mark Chagall Exhibition in Minsk – Civil Society Digest

A Mark Chagall exhibition in the centre of Minsk last week became a shining example of civic-business cooperation.

The statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania also returned to Minsk after being purchased at a Moscow antiques auction for \$45,000. The funds were raised as a result of a fundraising

campaign initiated by the Mahiliou Historical Museum involving Belarusian citizens, businesses and even the National Bank.

Sannikov`s female defense lawyer was barred to leave the country due to accusations of "avoiding mandatory army service". Freedom House classifies Belarus as a consolidated autocratic regime in its "Nations in Transit 2012" report. Another seven European countries join the EU sanctions.

Mark Chagall exhibition in Minsk. On June 7, an [open-air exhibition of reproductions](#) of the works of Belarus-born Mark Chagall was opened in the Yakub Kolas Square in Minsk commemorating the artist's 125th anniversary. The exhibit, which will be open until mid-September, is a result of over 12 months of planning and negotiations between civil society, government and business. The idea of the project, which received wide coverage in [independent](#) and [state](#) media, is to educate and unite the deeply divided nation about Belarus-rooted personalities and was developed by the Idea Foundation (Fond of Idea).

Initially, the Minsk city authorities were asked to allow the placement of large reproductions on building walls along the main avenues of the city. The request was denied. Through negotiations, the Foundation, which partnered with the French Embassy and the Museum of Contemporary Art, was able to convince Minsk City Executive Committee to allow the exhibition to take place in the Yakub Kolas Square. BelVEB Bank provided full funding for the exhibition. Minister of Culture Latushka opened the event which by some online commentators who stated they "can't believe this is happening in Minsk".

The disputed Above the Sky goes online. Director of the first Belarusian youth movie "Above the Sky", commissioned by UNDP Office in Belarus as a youth series, and was [then much disputed, uploaded the film on youtube.com](#) . As previously

informed, in late April, the film crew distributed a video appeal asking UNDP Office to allow a full-length version to screening, suggesting the film may have been subjected to censorship.

Committee on commemoration of Vitaly Silitski. A Committee on the commemoration of the first BISS director [Vitaly Silitski](#) has been established. The committee consists of about thirty well-known Belarusian and foreign public and academic figures. Among the Committee's activities there is a Scholarship and an Award named after Silitski, as well as publishing of a number of his books.

"Life without Barriers". Gomel NGO "[Disabled-spinalniki](#)" implements the project "Life without Barriers" with the support of the International Children's Fund. The aim of the project is to assist people with disabilities living in the Gomel region with employment. For this purpose, the organizers conduct trainings and published brochures.

Documentary "Together". The [Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities](#) initiated the producing of the documentary "Together" about inclusive education of children with and without disabilities. The film aims to form positive relationship models regarding people with disabilities. A presentation of the documentary "Together" was held on June 6 in Minsk.

Summer Camp for Human Rights. In order to promote civic education on human rights and legal protection of the public interest, the Legal Transformation Centre (Belarus), International Forum Burg Liebenzell (Germany), Flying University (Belarus) and others announce a call for applications for [VII Summer Camp for Human Rights](#). The Camp will be held from July 24 to August 3, 2012 in Bad Liebenzell. The participation fee is 80 euros.

Meeting "New Media – New Rules." On June 10, cultural portal

KY holds a unique meeting "[New Media – New Rules](#)", where representatives of the most famous online resources – Lookatme, Livejournal, and Onliner – will share their expertise in the field of online media, and their views on the prospect of development of Belarusian online media and the blogosphere. The meeting will be held at the hotel "Crown Plaza", Minsk.

Interaction between state and civil society

□ **BISS condemns jail sentence imposed on political analyst Pikulik.** On June 5, [the Board of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies](#) (BISS) issued a statement to condemn the jail term imposed on the institute's academic director, Alyaksey Pikulik, on June 1. In the statement, the BISS Board accused the authorities of waging an intimidation campaign against Pikulik and urged all independent political experts to "continue their activities, carry on with unbiased surveys of Belarus and remain committed to maintaining high professional standards despite intimidation."

"Granite" administration ignores independent trade union. The [administration of the Mikashevichy enterprise "Granite"](#) refused to provide office room for the independent trade union, though its members addressed a member of the lower chamber of the Parliament Larysa Vershalovich with a request for assistance in solving this issue.

Ronald Pofalla about Belarus. In case of an un-free election, the Belarusian opposition has no chance of winning. This opinion was expressed by the head office of the Federal Chancellor of Germany [Ronald Pofalla](#) at a press conference in Vilnius on June 8. He also noted that in the future, with the normalization of relations with the EU, Belarus "could perform a very important function – to be a bridge and to link Europe and eastern countries of the continent".

Sannikau's lawyer banned from leaving Belarus. [Maryna Kavaleuskaya](#), a lawyer of a former political prisoner Andrei Sannikau, was banned from leaving Belarus. She could not get to Vilnius on June 7.

Residents of the micro-district "Kolodishchi-2" initiate a public expertise. Residents of the micro-district "Kolodishchi-2" near Minsk initiate a public environmental assessment of the project of the residential area "Green Forest". They appealed to [the Minsk City Executive Committee](#) and expressed their concern about the planned construction a power plant, a vehicle fleet, and a rail and road junction. This will entail the demolition of about 800 garages and cutting green area.

Other notable news

Statute returned to Belarus. The [Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania of 1588](#) was delivered to Minsk. The Statute was sold by a Moscow antiques auction for \$45,000. The Mahiliou Historical Museum started a sound fundraising campaign which caused much buzz and managed to help to rapidly collect the necessary sum, involving Belarusian citizens, businesses and even the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus.

Nations in Transit 2012. On June 6, the Washington-based Freedom House released its comprehensive, comparative study of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Eurasia. [The report classifies Belarus](#) as a consolidated autocratic regime, in which the economy is controlled by the state with the exception of some limited activity in the private sector. The dimensions "Judicial Framework and Independence" and "Electoral Process" got the lowest scores.

UN should address «urgent human rights issues» in Belarus, says high commissioner. [The UN high commissioner for human rights](#) will recommend the UN to address "urgent human rights issues" in Belarus. In her report that will be discussed at

the UN Human Rights Council's 20th session to open on June 18, the commissioner says that the rights situation in the country has deteriorated after the December 2010 presidential election.

Another seven European countries – Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Iceland, Serbia, Albania and Liechtenstein – have [joined the economic and visa sanctions](#) of the EU against Belarus. This statement was made on June 8, by EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.