



Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

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Elihu Stone and “Our Beloved Lithuania”

On May 25, 1938, at a ceremony at Hotel Kenmore in Boston, Massachusetts, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Lithuanian independence, Elihu Stone was decorated with the Order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas, third class, for his distinguished service to his country of birth. The Order was presented by Consul-General of Lithuania Jonas Budrys, on behalf of Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona. In the speech he presented that day, “Lithuania Honors a Great Jew,” Dr. Frances Burnce asked, “In days of such overwhelming anti-Jewish demonstrations—why this outstanding recognition of a Jew?”¹

In a letter to Stone two days earlier, Povilas Žadeikis, Lithuanian minister to the United States, had answered this question, writing to Stone: “You, a member of the Hebrew race born in Lithuania and residing in America, have not only remembered the land

of your birth, but have also given a commendable example of the manifestation of one’s love for one’s native land not only by impressive phrases, but by performing good deeds and especially when the country is threatened with danger, as was the case with Lithuania during the years of 1919 and 1920.”²

Elihu David Stone was born on July 18, 1888, in Meretz (Merkinė), Lithuania, one of eight children of Elchanan Tzerelstein, a Talmudic and Semitic scholar, and Chana Libby Goldberg. (At some point, the children of this couple changed their surname to Stone.) Stone immigrated to Boston aboard the *Statendam* in February 1906, and subsequently attended Roxbury High School and then Boston University Law School, where he earned his LL.B.

Left: Banquet in honor of Elihu Stone’s service to Lithuania at Boston’s Hotel Kenmore, May 25, 1938. Right: Banquet program.



in 1915. Elihu established his own law office and in 1918 was appointed to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, sitting for two terms and serving on the Committee on Legal Affairs, the Judiciary Committee, and as Chair of the Committee on Elections. He also served as Assistant U.S. District Attorney for Massachusetts from 1922 to 1934.

Stone was active in the Zionist movement, and in 1919 was responsible for the passage of a resolution in the Massachusetts House of Representatives which urged American delegates at the Paris Peace Conference to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. He also petitioned for a resolution to recognize Lithuania, which had declared independence in 1918 but was still unrecognized by most of the international community. The resolution was adopted by the Commonwealth's House of Representatives on June 25, 1919, and the Massachusetts Senate on June 27, 1919. After years of hesitancy and more than a year and a half after all the other principal Allied powers, the U.S. government announced its recognition of Lithuania on July 28, 1922.

For his efforts in helping his native land achieve American recognition, Stone was awarded one of Lithuania's highest orders. In response to this honor, in front of an audience of over 400 Americans of Lithuanian descent, he said, "In a larger sense, this is not a personal honor. This decoration is rather an emblem of a covenant of amity and goodwill between the Jews and Lithuanians . . . In the spirit of this beautiful event I shall cherish this decoration and will always rejoice in the happiness, progress and peace of the country of my birth—our beloved Lithuania."³

Stone was not only a key advocate for his native country, but also for Meretz, his birthplace. Stone was a prominent member of Boston's Meretz Relief Association (MRA), a *landsmanshaft* (a society formed by Jewish immigrants from the same village,



Students at Meretz's Jewish primary school, Talmud Tora, circa 1921.

town, or city) founded in 1893 at 59 Hanover Street in Boston's North End with the stated goal of "aiding and assisting distressed brethren in need." Among the MRA's many original projects and services were its Immigrant Relief Commission, established in 1894 to help new immigrants from Meretz succeed in Boston; the provision of sick benefits and medical care; the disbursement of loans to its members; and financial support to Jewish charitable and communal institutions in Meretz. In 1914, the Meretz Cemetery Association bought a permanent cemetery location for its members at a site in Woburn, Massachusetts, about ten miles outside of the city. In 1916, the Meretz Free Loan Association was established to expand loan services; the MRA sold a Torah scroll to help start an endowment.

Although Stone had not yet arrived in Boston when the MRA was incorporated, he took an active role soon after he immigrated, serving as president in 1908 and several times between 1917 and 1919.

During the interwar period, the MRA expanded and grew to 300 members, plus an active Ladies Auxiliary. The organization hosted monthly Sunday breakfasts in Roxbury, then in

Dorchester-Mattapan, and held annual banquets to install new officers.

Unfortunately, their landsmen in Meretz and their Jewish countrymen in newly independent Lithuania were not flourishing. In the years following Lithuanian independence, as the country's largest minority—a 1923 census reported there were 153,743 citizens of "the Mosaic or Israelite faith," making up 7.6% of its total population⁴—Jews in Lithuania enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and tolerance. In 1924, however, things began to change with the passage of two new laws in the Seimas—the Lithuanian Parliament—that negatively affected the livelihoods of Lithuanian Jewry. The Festivals Law prohibited labor on Sundays—which effectively cut the workdays of Jewish businesses from six to five, as they were also closed on Saturdays in observance of the Sabbath. The Sign Law banned the use of any language other than Lithuanian in business records or signs, essentially forbidding the typical use of Yiddish in Jewish business dealings.⁵

Anti-Semitic speech also became more common. In 1923, Minister of Finance Vytautas Petrulis gave a speech in the Seimas portraying Jewish businessmen as chronic tax

evaders. The following year, a member of the Seimas justified the passing of the Festivals Law, by declaring that “we must liberate Kaunas [then the capital of Lithuania] from the Jewish bloodsuckers.” In 1933, President Antanas Smetona reportedly described Lithuania’s Jews as “active Communists” and “dishonest traders.”⁶

Stone himself visited Lithuania in 1929 as a representative of the Jewish Committee on Minority Rights, and in a speech to the MRA after his return to Boston, he described Jewish life in Lithuania as a “veritable inferno” where the Jews lived in “a state of fear and hopelessness as well as misery and poverty.”⁷ In 1931, Stone and his wife Esther traveled to Meretz for the last time to visit her relatives.

Over the next decades, the Boston MRA was forced to refocus its charitable efforts because, as Sarah Levitan, president of the MRA’s Ladies Auxiliary wrote, “Our beloved town of Meretz became just a memory.”⁸ On June 22, 1941, a year after it was occupied by the Soviet Union, Lithuania was invaded by Nazi Germany. Almost immediately, executions of Jews began, with 1,000 killed in the first few days after the invasion. On September 10, 1941, after being herded into the local synagogue and school and forced to dig their own graves, 854 Jews of

Meretz (223 men, 355 women, and 276 children) were shot by Lithuanian partisans. It is estimated that, of the approximately 220,000 Jews living in Lithuania when Germany invaded, only four percent survived.⁹

After the Holocaust, the MRA began to concentrate more on projects in Israel, where many of Meretz’s survivors had rebuilt their lives. In 1951, MRA president Louis G. Stone, Elihu’s brother, announced the establishment of the Meretz Free Loan Association in Israel, organized to “serve our brethren in a dignified and self-respecting manner, in order to help them become useful and happy citizens of the State of Israel.”¹⁰ An initial \$3,200 was granted to the association in Israel, with thousands more dollars sent in subsequent years. On September 16, 1962, the MRA dedicated a statue at its cemetery in memory of its landsmen killed in the Holocaust, with a service conducted by Rabbi Joseph Shubow, a World War II military chaplain who himself was born just outside Meretz.

Elihu Stone died March 22, 1952, leaving his wife Esther (Israel) and two sons, Theodore and Judah. For his years of service to the MRA, Elihu Stone, along with his brothers Louis and Moses, were commemorated with a plaque at the MRA cemetery on May 27, 1956. On June 5, 1983, the MRA

celebrated its centennial with a banquet, and ten years later, in 1993, the Meretz Relief Association disbanded. On February 16, 2018, Lithuania celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of its declaration of independence.

The Elihu David Stone Papers (P-555) contain speeches, essays, correspondence, programs, and photographs documenting Stone’s political career, professional activities, and involvement in the Zionist movement. The Meretz Relief Association (Boston, Mass.) Records (I-217) include constitutions, meeting minutes, financial reports, correspondence, and photographs detailing the history and activities of the organization. For more information or to request access to these collections, please email jhreference@nehgs.org. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ Frances Burnce, “Lithuania Honors a Great Jew,” speech transcript, Elihu David Stone Papers.
- ² Letter to Elihu Stone from P. Zadeikis, May 23, 1938, Elihu David Stone Papers.
- ³ “Elihu D. Stone Given Award for Distinguished Service to Lithuania; Crowd Present,” *Jewish Advocate*, May 27, 1938, 7.
- ⁴ This number does not include the population of Vilnius, Lithuania’s current capital, which had a large Jewish population but was occupied by Poland during this period.
- ⁵ Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania: A History of a Remarkable Community, 1316–1945* (Jerusalem: Gefen Books, 1995), 253–54.
- ⁶ Greenbaum [note 5], 251, 253, 279.
- ⁷ “Stone Addresses Meretz Relief,” *Jewish Advocate*, September 26, 1929, A1.
- ⁸ Installation of Officers Banquet and Dance Program, January 29, 1956, Meretz Relief Association (Boston, Mass.) Records.
- ⁹ Dov Levin, “Lithuania,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lithuania, 2011.
- ¹⁰ “Boston Meretz Relief Association Establishes a Free Loan Fund for Meretz-Landsleit in Israel,” Meretz Relief Association (Boston, Mass.) Records.



At this reception in honor of Elihu Stone’s 1931 visit, he is seated third from right, and pictured with some members of the Meretz Free Loan Association.