

A Visit to Ponyvez, the Birthplace of the Loons by Gail Loon Lustig

One of the main purposes of my flight and short visit to Lithuania this July 2026, was to see where Grandpa David Loon, born in 1896 spent his childhood. He had never spoken about his time in a Russian dominated Ponyvez and so I had really nothing to go on while walking through the streets.

I did discover that the Jews lived in and around the Old Market Square in the Slobdka quarter (Ukmerges Street). There were many amongst them who were very poor as too were David's family. The children probably studied in the *Talmud Torah* School and were often given meals by the various social organizations that supported these families especially after the father left them behind for a few years before they could join him.

Walking through the areas where the family probably lived, now modern and without a hint of those times, was intriguing to say the least. I had never imagined there was a river curving its way along the shtetl, which must have played quite a part in their lives. It felt really comforting knowing that the Loons and their fellow men and friends who were from the shtetl, had avoided the massacre that occurred later, by traveling all the way to South Africa right at the beginning of the 20th Century. The three young boys and their mother Sora Riva, followed in the footsteps of father, Elias Loon. David was 12 years old when he left Lithuania.



Sora Riva, Elias Loon and their 8 children in Johannesburg



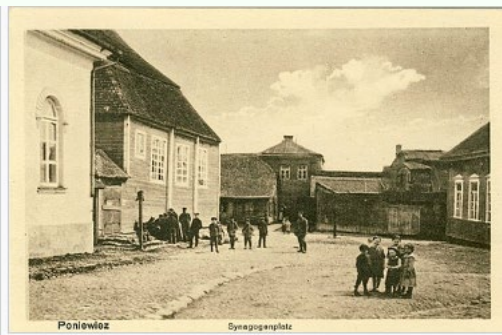
*Sora Riva and Elias Loon before they left Ponyvez,
Lithuania*



Panevėžys in the early 20th century

A little bit about the city itself:

Ponyvez is situated in the centre of Lithuania; it is halfway between the two Baltic capitals – Lithuania's Vilnius, and Latvia's Riga. The territory of the city covers 90 km² (34.75 sq mi) and it is situated on the banks of the river Nevėžis. Parks and greenery in the city occupy about 700 hectares or 14% of the total area of Ponyvez.



Square of synagogues, 1915



By the end of the 19th Century, Ponyevez had become a strong economic and cultural center of the region. At the time, it was the fourth most important settlement in Lithuania. In 1897 there were 6,627 Jews (51% of 13,044 total population).

Ponyevez has a rich history of Lithuanian Jews. In 1875, there were eight local synagogues, possibly with the same amount of communities who came together to hold prayer services.

Most of the members of the community were shopkeepers and merchants, but there were also many in skilled occupations such as carpenters, leather workers, milliners, glove makers, saddle makers, tinsmiths, glaziers, knitters, oven builders, watchmakers, dressmakers, laundry washers, porters, cart owners and other workers, who waited every day at the street corner for a potential employer to spot them.

In 1905, the first Lithuanian bookstore and printing house was opened in Ponyevez. The building is still a landmark of the city and local people are proud of this heritage, embedded in a bookstore that has been functional for more than 100 years.

Because of the severity of the reaction of the Soviet Rule against the Lithuanian revolutionaries who were proponents of Independence and because the Jewish youth didn't see any future for themselves, immigration to South Africa and America increased rapidly.

Today there are no Jews left in Ponyevez. They were all cruelly killed in August 1941 by Lithuanian neighbours and the Nazis and buried in pits just outside the town.

My visit to Ponyevez had a special meaning for me. It felt like I had at last connected the dots along our family's journey that needed to be drawn to a close. It was as if I'd finally had the conversation with Grandpa Dave that never surfaced between us..

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**A Visit to Ponyevez, written in September, 2026 by Gail Loon Lustig**

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