

World ORT



*Educating for Life*



**A Tradition of Education for European Jewish Communities**

## World ORT—then and now...



Students at ORT Shalom Aleichem Jewish School, Vilnius, Lithuania

**W**orld ORT is one of the largest Jewish non-governmental education and training organisation in the world. It is also one of the oldest. ORT was founded in St Petersburg in 1880 by a group of prominent Jewish intellectuals, financiers and industrialists to provide relief for the impoverished Jews of Tsarist Russia through training and the support of working families; since that time it has played a major role in the development of schools and education programmes in almost every region in which Jews have lived. By separating itself from political and partisan issues and by insisting on excellence in every activity that it undertakes, ORT has gained the respect of governments, training agencies and communities, and has earned a reputation as a reliable and dependable educational service provider.

In good times and in troubled times in times of war or peace, in times of economic plenty or of financial decline, ORT's schools and educational programmes have functioned to provide a lifeline and a route to self-sufficiency for hundreds of thousands of individuals and families. Today ORT flourishes in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, countries of the former Soviet Union, North America, Latin America and in India and Africa. In Israel, World ORT's vibrant programmes bring modern technology and methods to towns and villages in the periphery of the country, contributing to the regeneration of these communities and new opportunities for young people and adults.

ORT embraces modern computer and communications technology both as a subject for study and as a means of enhancing the teaching of subjects across the curriculum. One of the first educational organisations to develop an internet presence, today ORT's websites, in many different languages, provide access to knowledge in a huge range of subjects. World ORT maintains an active policy of exploring new educational developments and of ensuring that its educational offerings remain constantly up-to-date and relevant.



Students from the ORT Vilna Technikum with school Director, Doctor Schrieber, 1934

# ORT activities in Eastern Europe from 1880 to 1950

1880

**ORT** (Russian for *Obshestvo Remeslennogo i Zemledelcheskogo Truda sredi evreev v Rossii*, originally meaning The Society for Trades and Agriculture among the Jews in Russia) the founders believed that vocational training was the key to Russian Jewry's survival.

1880–1906

ORT collects more than a million roubles, distributing funds to Jewish schools for handicraft and agricultural training and providing grants or loans to artisans and farmers.

1906–1920

ORT's cooperative workshops, soup kitchens and credit offices save thousands of Jews from starvation, while a large network of labour bureaus helps the unemployed to find work.

1921

ORT becomes international in both membership and operations: World ORT Union is founded in **Berlin**.

1920s–1930s

**Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania:**

ORT concentrates on providing Jewish workers with modern skills and qualifications:

- ORT sets up trade schools for the young and vocational courses for adults, providing the latest in technical education, often in purpose-built, well-equipped educational facilities funded by its fundraising efforts in the West. Notable among these are the **ORT Vilna (Vilnius) Technikum**, the **ORT Kovno (Kaunas) trade school**, and the **Dvinsk (Daugavpils) trade school**.
- ORT runs an apprenticeship programme enabling participants to earn money while learning a trade.
- ORT Purchase Bureaus facilitate the acquisition and distribution of machinery, tools and materials for Jewish artisans and farmers.

ORT supports numerous agricultural projects, particularly in **Bessarabia (in Romania)**.

**Soviet Union:**

- ORT, along with JDC and ICA assist Jews onto the land as farmers – notably in southern **Ukraine, Crimea and Birobidzhan**.
- ORT works with the authorities to establish industries and supply materials and machinery.
- 1938 – the Soviet government refuses to renew its contract with ORT and seizes all of its assets.

*The ORT Trade school building in Dvinsk (Daugavpils), Latvia, 1920s*



# ORT activities in Eastern Europe from 1880 to 1950

1933–1936

Hitler's rise to power means Germany is no longer safe for Jewish organisations and individuals alike. World ORT Union's Berlin headquarters are transferred to **Paris** in October 1933.

ORT organises vocational retraining programmes for German Jewish refugees who had escaped to **Latvia** and **Lithuania**.

New programmes are also established in **Bulgaria** (1935) and **Hungary** (1936).

1939

**World War II:** Most of ORT's programmes continue to function beyond September 1939. As the war progresses, communication between World ORT Union and its European programmes is often cut, but schools and programmes continue in isolation with former ORT directors and teachers working within their camps and ghettos.

Within weeks of the invasion of Poland, ORT's **Warsaw** workshops reopen, clandestinely at first, but in August 1940 ORT is given official authorisation to operate. Thousands take up places.

*It is possible that as many as 20,000 people received training between September 1940 and early August 1942, when the deportations were stepped up and ORT was again forced into hiding. Studying or working with ORT helped many avoid early deportation, and when the ghetto was liquidated in April 1943 ORT students and graduates were numbered among those who resisted.*

1940–1941

ORT's work in **Latvia** and **Lithuania** continues throughout the first year of the war, but ORT institutions are nationalised when the Soviets take over these countries. In 1941, with the German occupation, several ORT teachers are interned in the **Kovno ghetto**.

1942

A secret ORT teaching programme begins in the **Kovno ghetto**. This is discovered and closed down, but the Jewish Council succeeds in persuading the authorities that ORT schools are indispensable to the ghetto's industry.

*As in Warsaw, the Kovno schools ended with the ghetto's destruction (July 1944), but ORT's work bought time for its students and contributed much to the material comfort and morale of the ghetto's inhabitants.*

# ORT activities in Eastern Europe from 1880 to 1950

1945–1950

ORT is instrumental in providing much-needed education and vocational skills to **Holocaust survivors**, enabling them to begin rebuilding their shattered lives:

- As well as working in the displaced persons camps of **Germany**, **Austria** and **Italy**, ORT returns to some of its pre-war countries of activity. Programmes are re-established in **Bulgaria**, **Hungary**, **Poland** and **Romania**.
- A programme is also established for the first time in **Czechoslovakia**.
- ORT's programmes in all of these countries come to a close around 1949, when its schools are nationalised by the various Communist regimes. Fortunately, by the late 1940s many of the students had already left for **Israel** or the **West**.



Students at the ORT Agricultural school and farm in Kalinovo, near Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, 1930s

**World ORT**, through its schools, learning centres and its Internet websites, provides Hebrew and Jewish educational programmes to many thousands of learners throughout the world. For many, studying at ORT is their first and only opportunity to learn about their traditions and to explore their heritage.

As a root-and-branch Jewish organisation, World ORT is committed to helping its students to strengthen their Jewish identity and to reinforce their sense of belonging. By providing interactive learning environments that use modern educational technology and methods, ORT encourages Jewish students from diverse backgrounds and with a broad spectrum of religious commitment to engage with their history and culture.

This is especially significant in the countries of the former Soviet bloc where many families had all but lost touch with their Jewish origins. Those that were interested in re-establishing their or their ancestors' links with Jewish tradition found a welcome with orthodox groups. Many, however, could not relate to this manifestation of Judaism and remained estranged. With its inclusive approach, ORT has been able to reach out to these groups and to demonstrate that Jewish education holds no threats and is available to learners from all backgrounds. As a result, families have put the subject on their agenda for the first time and at all ORT schools in the region students now happily devote an average of 20% of their school time to Hebrew and Jewish studies.

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*Chanukkah celebrations at The ORT Lyceum in Kiev, Ukraine*



*Hebrew and Jewish studies class in Sofia, Bulgaria*

# Jewish learning resources



World ORT's Internet programmes reach out to the Diaspora encouraging young people to engage with their heritage.

Among World ORT's developments in this field are learning resources which deal with many aspects of Jewish life and history in ways that stimulate renewed interest among people of all ages. Included among these are the following:

**Navigating the Bible ([www.ort.org](http://www.ort.org))** is a popular internet website as well as a CD designed primarily as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutor. It contains all readings of the Torah and Haftarat in full audio, accompanied by the text in Hebrew with English, Russian and Spanish translation and transliteration. Interest in this product has never flagged and the Internet site continues to clock over 60,000 hits per day.

**Learning about the Holocaust through Art ([art.holocaust-education.net](http://art.holocaust-education.net))** is a website built in collaboration with the Ghetto Fighters' Museum in Israel. It contains 250 art works relating to the Holocaust and can be accessed in Hebrew, English, Russian and Spanish across the Internet. The materials contain the biographies of 27 artists and descriptions of 17 locations in Europe where Jews and others were held and persecuted by the Nazis.

**Music and the Holocaust ([holocaustmusic.ort.org](http://holocaustmusic.ort.org))** explores the impact of the years of Nazi rule on the music of the time presented through text, photographs and interactive maps. As well as providing an opportunity to listen to the music itself, the website examines the lives of the people involved – performers, composers, lyricists and poets – and the camps and ghettos where their victims were imprisoned.

**The Yizkor website ([yizkor.ort.org](http://yizkor.ort.org))** provides essential information to some 3,000 visitors each month who wish to learn about Jewish memorial customs. Over 4,000 on-line memorials have been created for subscribers, who also register to receive an email reminder of an impending Yahrzeit.

**ORT, The Second World War and the Rehabilitation of Holocaust Survivors** tells the story of ORT's activities in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the vital role played by the organisation in the rehabilitation of Holocaust Survivors. It traces the origins of ORT's pre-war work in Europe, from the secret courses run in workshops in the ghettos, to the establishment of the vocational courses for some 80,000 people in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps of post-war Europe and the assistance given to the survivors to rebuild their lives in Palestine as well as in other countries. Currently published as a book, it will also be developed into a website.

*ORT's global activities in the field of Jewish education have made an impact on the lives of many thousands of individuals and families who, otherwise, would have had no opportunity of connecting with their heritage.*



ORT students at the ORT Technology Centre in Khakov, Ukraine



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*Photo front: Carpentry course for refugees, Zbaszyn, Poland, 1930s*

*Photo back: Computer studies at The Lauder Gur Aryeh Jewish Community Day School, ORT Technology Centre, Prague, Czech Republic*