

## International Conference

### Heritage and Civil Society: Grassroots Memory Practices and Fragile Legacies

Vilnius, Lithuania, 11-12 December 2025

Hosted by the European Humanities University (EHU)  
Vilnius, Savičiaus str., 17

#### Conference Theme

Over the past century, the concept of cultural heritage has been shaped by national narratives and institutional control. Yet in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe, especially in post-socialist societies, heritage often exists beyond the reach of traditional preservation systems: fragmented, endangered, or neglected. In such contexts, the responsibility for safeguarding memory increasingly shifts toward civic initiatives, local communities, diasporas, and individuals.

The conference is an open-format two-day event exploring how heritage can be documented, reimagined, and cared for in fragile, forgotten, or hard-to-access contexts. The program will feature grassroots and independent projects that experiment with oral and family history, new curatorial models, and digital tools that help reconnect dispersed narratives.

*All conference speakers are experienced researchers and practitioners working with cultural heritage from Belarus and other countries. We are intentionally not disclosing their names for security reasons.*

#### Conference program (short version)

*Full version will be sent to registered participants*

#### Day 1. December 11, 2025

12.30 – 13.00     **Registration and Welcoming Coffee**

13.00 – 13.30     **Opening of the Conference and Welcome Address**

13.30 – 14.30     **Presentation: Mapping of the Central and Eastern European Non-Governmental Heritage Sector (2025)**

The presentation introduces the 2025 report by Europa Nostra Heritage Hub in Kraków, the result of a two-year, cross-national study covering ten Central and Eastern European countries – Belarus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. The report provides the first comprehensive mapping of the non-governmental heritage sector in the region, estimating around 33,500 heritage-oriented NGOs, analyzing their size, types of heritage activities (tangible, intangible, digital), organisational forms, motivations, and sectoral challenges (funding, institutional recognition, generational renewal). Our presentation will outline the sector's key strengths – its vitality and strong value-driven mission – alongside its main vulnerabilities, including fragmentation, financial instability, limited policy support, and burnout risks. We will also discuss the report's strategic recommendations for strengthening heritage NGOs across the CEE region.

- 14.30 – 16.30 **Discussion Panel: The Autonomous Logic of Family Heritage: How Families Produce, Store, and Transform Memory**  
We often speak about family memories within the framework of state memory politics, as something largely shaped by external circumstances. Yet family heritage is far more resilient, and its formation and transmission follow primarily internal psychological and cultural logics. The mechanisms and forms of such transmission are only beginning to be studied. During the panel, a psychotherapist, a historian, and a cultural anthropologist will discuss how the past shapes our behavior, how family archives transform during periods of crisis, and in what ways objects can sustain or alter the memory of our ancestors.
- 16.30 – 17.00 **Coffee Break**
- 17.00 – 18.00 **Presentation of the “Kalyska” Family Video Archive and screening of “inTact” Documentary Film**  
The observational documentary invites the viewer into a twelve-square-meter room where eighteen members of one family crowd together — an archetypal space of a Soviet Khrushchyovka apartment. In this density of bodies and voices, chaos transforms into tenderness: a practice of reflecting on the past that reveals to the collective witness a special family ritual — unchanged across generations yet disrupted by the upheavals of the 1990s in the post-Soviet peripheries. Hopefully, only for a moment.
- 18.00 – 20.30 **Workshop by contemporary Belarusian artist Hutka Smachna in collaboration with Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Heritage Center: “Crafting Memory: A Hands-On Introduction to the Slonim Great Synagogue” (number of participants is limited, requires separate registration!)**  
This workshop invites participants to explore the cultural and historical layers of the Slonim Great Synagogue through a creative, hands-on format led by Belarusian artist Hutka-Smachna. Combining elements of applied art, craft, and visual storytelling, the session introduces the synagogue not only as an architectural landmark, but also as a vessel of community memory and a symbol of Belarus’s multicultural past. A collaboration in frames of the “Belarus Shtetl” project, Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Heritage Center

## Day 2. December 12, 2025

- 10.00 – 12.00 **Discussion Panel: Interpreting Family Heritage: Narrative, Pedagogical, and Archival Practices**  
The panel examines contemporary formats through which family heritage is interpreted and transmitted. It highlights how personal narratives function as tools against forgetting and how emerging forms of documentation help preserve elements of the past. The session will feature an experimental university course on understanding and preserving family history, taught at EHU in spring 2025, alongside research demonstrating how individual biographies are woven into broader social and historical contexts. A special segment of the panel will be dedicated to the presentation of a recently published autoethnographic book that narrates the history of Belarus through the story of a single family.

12.00 – 12.30 **Coffee Break**

12.30 – 14.00 **Discussion Panel: The Environmental Potential of Heritage: Communities and Civic Initiatives**

This panel examines how climate change and environmental degradation threaten both material heritage and the continuity of traditional practices sustained by local communities. Despite international recognition of the link between cultural and natural heritage, ecological and heritage sectors often remain disconnected. Bringing together experts from both fields, the session highlights Belarusian and global examples of cross-sector collaboration and explores the ecological value of traditional knowledge. Discussion topics include community involvement in biodiversity protection, the role of traditional practices in climate adaptation, the rights of nature in heritage governance, and the creative reinterpretation of intangible heritage.

14.00 – 15.30 **Lunch**

16.00 – 19.00 **Special Event: Developing the Virtual Belarusian Jewish Museum: Concept and Pilot Digital Collection**

This session presents the work-in-progress Virtual Belarusian Jewish Museum – a “museum without walls” concept, exploring new approaches to heritage work in contexts marked by fragmentation, loss, and limited institutional infrastructure. The project team will outline the project’s conceptual framework, which combines digital reconstruction, public engagement, and cross-border collaboration to target a heritage landscape largely destroyed during the 20th century, scattered and inaccessible today. Participants will learn how the pilot Digital Collection mobilizes civil-society partners as “collectors” and “ambassadors” who reconnect scattered archival records, family materials, and local memories. The session concludes with a panel discussion featuring curators, researchers, and community contributors reflecting on methods, challenges, and early insights from the pilot phase.

19.00 – 20.30 **Honorary Dinner**

**Also! Both days of the conference, December 11-12:**

12:00 – 20:00 **VR Showcase: Reconstructed Synagogues of Belarus**

The Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Heritage Center presents immersive VR reconstructions of two landmark Belarusian synagogues – now lost or endangered. The showcase offers a rare opportunity to experience Belarusian Jewish heritage through cutting-edge digital storytelling.

**On View:**

- **The Great Synagogue of Wolpa** – A fully reconstructed model of one of Eastern Europe’s most celebrated wooden synagogues, lost during WWII.
- **The Great Synagogue of Ashmyany** – A detailed VR recreation preserving its distinctive interior with cosmological paintings.

*Registration is optional, but recommended to minimize waiting time.*