

The History of MIEDZYRZEC PODLASKI

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In the Jewish sources Mezritch Podlaski.

A city in the district of Lublin, in the region of Radzyn, Poland

There is no certainty as to the origins of the Jewish community in the city. According to one tradition in 1390, the king of Poland, WLADYSLAW JAGELLO, granted the villages Stolpno and MIEDZYRZEC to Abraham Chamietz, who was not specified as being Jewish. There are some people who see in the name Chamietz a corruption of the name Chamiens (In Yiddish Ben Chaim – the son of Chaim), and thus the assumption us that the Jewish community was established by 1400. According to another theory the first Jews arrived in 1511. They had been expelled from Lithuania according to the law “de non tolerandis Judeis”

In 1562 The city hosted one Jewish street, one synagogue that also served as a school and a Jewish cemetery. There is no certainty as to when the first synagogue was established. Miedzyrzec is one of the towns in Poland where Hebrew books were published. In 1595 Yaakov Pollock owned a printing press which was later moved to Basel Switzerland. In 1576, when Poland and Lithuania were united, the town was included within the borders of Lithuania..

In 1793, during the second partition of Poland, the city was annexed to Austria, and later, in 1815 the Congress of Vienna transferred the town to Russia. With the establishment of an independent Poland, towards the end of World War I, Miedzyrzec was included within its boundaries. It appears that the city received its first communal services from the city of Brisk, and after the unification of Poland and Lithuania it was annexed to the community of Tykocin. The Jewish community of Miedzyrzec was unhappy with this decision and fought for their independence, which they achieved in 1868.





"Prayer" - a statue of Yael Artzi



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By 1674, 21% of the population were Jews and by 1677 Jews were the majority of the population (63%). Along the years, the Jewish population increased and their power amplified. At the time of the Chmelnicki revolts, during 1648-49, the Cossacks reached Podlasie. Miedzyrzec by then a town in Podlasie suffered 300 deaths. Much property was looted by the Cossacks as well as by the local non Jewish population.

The Jewish community was revived again in the 18th century. In 1793, the Jewish request to join the KOSCIUSZKO was denied by the authorities, and the revolutionaries looted the Jewish community.

In 1815 the Jewish community was accused of Ritual Murder. 11 individuals were arrested and were only released 20 months later after being acquitted. Three died while they were in prison.

During the revolt against the Russians in 1830, there were battles within the city and the Jews of Miedzyrzec sided with the Poles. When the revolt was crushed the Russians planned to burn all Jewish property as an act of punishment. Solomon Cirles, among the wealthiest Jews of the town, paid the Russians not to torch Jewish property and the deadly plan was not carried out.

In 1764, after The Council of Four Lands, which Miedzyrzec was part of, ceased to exist, the Jews of the city began to operate as an autonomous body. Subsequent to the annexation by Russia in 1815, the authorities cancelled all of the independence of the Jewish community, and appointed their own leaders. In Miedzyrzec a Rabbi and two dayanim (religious judges) were appointed and received their salary from the community.

Unlike the general area, where most of the Jews tended to be part of various Hassidic sects, the majority of the community in Miedzyrzec were Mitnagdim (those who opposed the Hassidim). The relationship between the Hassidim and the Mitnagdim was amicable. At one point the Hassidic Rabbi Yechiel Michael Halperin of Kuzmier served as the Rabbi of Miedzyrzec. Only during the 19th century, when Rabbi Yom Tov Raphael Lippman, an extreme Mitnagid, served as Rabbi, did an intense argument occur which culminated in Rabbi Lippman placing the Hassidim in cherem (excommunication). As a consequence of his action Rabbi Lippman was forced to leave the community and things reverted to normal.

Among the other important Rabbis were Rabbi Zvi Hirsch who served during the end of the 16th century, Rabbi Natan Netta Katzenelbogen who came to live in Eretz Yisrael and died there in 1689, Rabbi Yehoshua Lieb Diskin who came to live in Eretz Yisrael and established the Diskin Orphanage, and Rabbi Issa Shapira who came in 1930. Rabbi Yitzhak Yakov Wachtfogel was a rabbi in Meah Shearim in Jerusalem, and Rabbi Shimon Yakov Halevi who was a rabbi in Tel Aviv, were both born in Miedzyrzec.

In a fire that broke out in 1845, three hundred houses were destroyed and the synagogue, whose construction began in 1761, and contained about 3000 seats, was partially damaged. The Beit Midrash Hagadol (Yeshiva) that was located across the street, was also partially damaged. Fires were quite



Deportation of the Jews to Lubelski Street (before the bridge)



Market Square in Mezritch - 1930



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In 1937, in order to reduce the number of Jews on the council, several outlying villages were added to the municipal roles, and therefore the number of Jews on the council dropped down. Before Second World War, the population of the city (including the outlying villages) was 20,000, and the Jews population was approximately 90% of them. The municipal boundaries were 62.7 square kilometers and the majority of the 1600 homes were populated by Jews. The town hosted 201 homes, of which 180 were owned by Jews. In a section of the city called "Red", there were four very large stone buildings, similar to a mall today. The 88 Jewish shops in the central square of the city were demolished by the Germans in 1940.

The brush industry, which was known worldwide, employed thousands of workers with an export value in the millions of dollars. The tanneries were also well thought of for the quality of their work. Additionally, the city contained dozens of small workshops and factories. There were three weekly newspapers as well as a Jewish hospital, a volunteer fire brigade, a brass band, sport's clubs, a Jewish high school where subjects were taught in Polish, a Tarbut school where the language of instruction was Hebrew, and very many small synagogues (shtibelach).

Ironically, after 500 years of Jewish productivity in Miedzyrzec the only thing that remains today is the cemetery.

The Holocaust Period 1.9.39 -26.6.1944

The heavy bombardment that the city suffered at the beginning of the war was a foreshadowing of what awaited the Jews of Miedzyrzec. The Germans entered the city on the 13th of September 1939, and they were replaced twelve days later, by the Russians on September 25. The Red Army was only there for two weeks and with their retreat some 2000 young Jews managed to join them. The Wehrmacht reconquered the city on October 9, and on the 20th of October, the city was transferred into the hands of the Gestapo. The Nazi's put a high tax on the Jewish community and until it was paid 20 Jews were held as hostages. Jews were expelled from their homes on the main streets and forced to relocate. The German authorities confiscated this property. The Germans established the Judenrat and the Jewish police. Jews were not permitted to use public transportation, and were ordered to wear the white arm band with the blue Star of David on it. Many Jews were kidnapped on the streets and taken for forced labor. Jews who were expelled from outlying villages were housed in the buildings of the community.

Among the Nazi groups that were stationed in the city there were the Gendarmerie and the Schupo, (German police) who would later be responsible for murdering the Jews of Miedzyrzec. Among the gendarmes was Sergeant Franz Bauer, who personally killed 1000 of the Jewish residents. In the summer of 1940 six separate work camps were set up where some 2000 Jews worked in terrible conditions. Many of the workers died of hunger and cold. The Jews no longer had any rights. Jewish factories were expropriated, among them the brush factory. Other factories were transferred to Polish ownership.



Mezritch market, the court which convened the Jews during the deportations. (Photo taken after the war)



Ghetto Mezritch . Bazecesca Street



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according to the German inventory) and sent to Treblinka. Some of the people still thought that they were being shipped to the “east” and they therefore brought suitcases and personal belongings. Those deported included men, women, children and infants. The murderers brutally tortured the infants in front of their mothers as part of a game. Some 2000 Jews were killed in the streets and in their hiding places by the Nazi’s. The entire operation was commanded by the German S.S general Odil Glodocknick from Lublin. Units composed of Lithuanians, Ukrainians, the blue police of the Poles, the gendarmes, Schupo, S.S. and the Gestapo participated in this action.

On August 28, 1942, for the first time in the history of the Jews of Miedzyrzec a Ghetto was established. A few streets in the old section of town called Szmulowizna were encircled by barbed wire. The Jews who remained in the city were moved into the crowded area of the ghetto. Most of the Jewish property was looted by the Germans and by the Poles. Jewish refugees from Poland and Czechoslovakia were brought in, adding these crowded conditions.

The Second Action took place between October 6 and 9. Some 7000 Jews were forcibly assembled in the town square. At this stage everyone knew what their fate was. The Czienki brothers, who managed to escape from Treblinka, informed the Judenrat of Miedzyrzec and other Jewish ghettos about the extermination that was taking place. The head of the Judenrat told the Gestapo about the brothers and they were shot on one of the small streets of the city. After several hours of being confined to the city square the Jews were locked up in the synagogue, in inhuman conditions. After three days without food or water the Jews were brought to the train station and put on cattle cars and sent to Treblinka. A few managed to jump out through the doors of the speeding train.

Between October 27 and 29 and November 7 and 8 two actions took place without respite. The Germans, assisted by the Jewish police conducted searches in the Ghetto. Many Jews were captured and shot on sight. Others were sent to camps. At this time many lost their will to live and simply turned themselves over to the Germans.

On December 24 the entire brush industry was removed to Trawniki. Some 500 men and women were relocated without resistance. In the summer of 1943 they were transferred from Trawniki to Majdanek, and there, after a few months of labor, were shot to death.

On December 31, the Gestapo from Biala Podlaska came to the Ghetto and during their New Year celebration murdered 65 Jews.

On May 2 and 3, 1943, after a long hiatus, a fifth action took place.

Si ⓘ 3000 Jews were captured and sent to different camps. Approximately 200 caught trying to hide, were marched to the cemetery, forced to undress, and were then shot. A Jewish youth named Chaim Foga



City Center



Jewish Cemetery



