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The History of MIEDZYRZEC PODLASKI

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 is 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"

Jews in Miedzyrzec

By 1674, 21% of the population were Jews and by 1827 Jews were the majority of the population (65%). 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 than 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 Wachtfoegel 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 common in Miedzyrzec and caused great hardship to the Jewish and non-Jewish population. It was not uncommon to have an outbreak of cholera after a fire, leading to a high death toll. According to the pharmacist Eichler about 1000 people died within two weeks in 1848, and the city was cut-off from the rest of the world. Only the postal messenger was allowed to quickly drop off the mail and leave.

The city also had several Batei Midrash (Yeshivot) of tailors, shoemakers, brushmakers and coachmen, as well as others which bore the names of their founders. In each of the Batei midrash there were daily lessons for the general public. The Hassidim had their own synagogues. There were a remarkable number of charitable institutions which provided for brides, visiting of the sick, a hostel for the poor, a soup kitchen, an orphanage, an old age home as well as many other benevolent causes.

In 1850 a stone hospital replaced the wooden one that had burned down, and one of the hospital's physicians was appointed as the district doctor. After World War I the hospital expanded and included several outpatient clinics including a clinic for mothers and children. In 1925 a branch of TAZ the Jewish health organization in Poland was established.

The first Jewish educational institution, the Talmud Torah, had a building constructed in 1867. As time passed, secular subjects, as well as, Spoken Hebrew were added to the curriculum. When the 20th century began the number of "modern" Talmud Torahs increased including one called Talmud Torah and Derech Eretz (courtesy and respect). When Poland decreed mandatory education, this school became the Jewish primary school. In Miedzyrzec, there were two public boys schools and two for girls. In 1912, with the government's approval, four high school classes were opened and one of the subjects studied was Hebrew. Two years before World War I a yeshiva opened, but closed at the outbreak of the war, and re-opened in the 1920's.

By the end of 19th century, the cultural life of the city was vibrant. Writers were invited to give lectures about their work, a large library was opened that included books in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and German and local drama and theater troupes from outside the city appeared in the local theater. The local Jewish fire brigade, a volunteer organization, established in 1904, had its own brass band.

From the very beginning Jewish economic life was based on merchants and trade. Jewish traders went to the fairs in Germany and bought textiles and silk which were sold in the local market. They also brought back books of the Jewish philosopher of the Haskala (Enlightenment) Moses Mendelsohn. The young studied German as well as Polish. In 1775 the city had four separate fairs at fixed times which attracted both local and foreign shoppers.

By 1782 Jews were granted full rights. The annexation by Russia opened up many new markets for the Jews. The abolition of trade guilds by the Russians aided the Jewish craftsmen, who had not been accepted to the guilds. The Jews were also in the forefront of industry. Tanned skins were sold throughout the country. In the 19th century the brush making industry was started, and until the 2nd world war Miedzyrzec was the largest brushmaking city in the world. Miedzyrzec furs were sold throughout the markets of Russia.

In 1845 the pharmacist Eichler built an Eau de Cologne factory that was widely acclaimed, and he participated in fairs in Cologne. In addition there were some smaller factories such as for the production of matches.

In 1906 a Jewish merchant bank opened. During WWI the economy stagnated. Many of the citizens fled the city and those that remained suffered great hunger. The Jewish orphanage expanded its activities and took in Jewish children from other cities.

After the war (1918) the Jews attempted to rehabilitate themselves but the new borders inhibited trade, both external and internal. Jewish business also suffered due to the Polish cooperatives which had been established in the 1920's.

In 1921 there were about 250 Jewish factories and enterprises, where only 800 owners and workers were employed. Salaried wage earners barely earned enough and were dependant on donations from relatives abroad and from the Joint Distribution Committee. In 1925 Jewish merchants and craftsmen organized to open a line of credit, and in 1927 a Jewish cooperative bank was established.

Towards the end of the 1920's the Jews established several small factories including metal wire, pens and light bulbs. Jews owned 3 flour mills. The minority of the Jewish population were physicians, lawyers and other so called free professionals.

The Zionist ideal attracted followers, and in 1893, twenty members of the Miedzyrzec's chapter of Hibat Zion came to Israel and established the colony at Yesod Hamaalah in the Galilee. After WWI a Zionist club was established, where Hebrew and Bible were taught. The Zionist organizations that operated within the city included: The General Zionists; Mizrahi; Revisionists (from 1926); and the United Movement which was established in 1933 with the merger of Hitachdut and Poalei Zion.

Among the youth movements there were Hashomer Hatzair which was established in the beginning of the 20's and Gordonia, which was established in the late 20's and had its own training farm. In 1926 "Hechalutz" was founded and two years later "Hechalutz Hatzair." In 1927 "Hechalutz Mizrahi" was established followed in 1930 by "Tzierei Mizrahi". Beitars was established in 1930. In 1923 a sports association "Bar-Kochba" was founded along with a drama group and symphony.

"Agudat Yisrael," a non-zionist organization established a group in 1920. After a short while a youth group for boys, "Tzierei Agudat Yisrael" and girls, "Beit Yaakov" were set up. Among the socialists, the "Bund" was established in 1901. A strike that they called for in 1905 shut down the city for several days. The "Bund" also operated in the cultural sphere. They established a club, library, a Yiddish school, a youth group called Tzukunft (Future), a children's group called Skif and a sports group called Morgenshtern (Morning light).



Market Square in Mezritch - 1930



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

The power of the Jews came to light in the municipal elections of 1920 when the Jews won 17 out of 24 mandates. Two of the three members of the municipal council were Jews. S. Kamnin served as vice-mayor. 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.

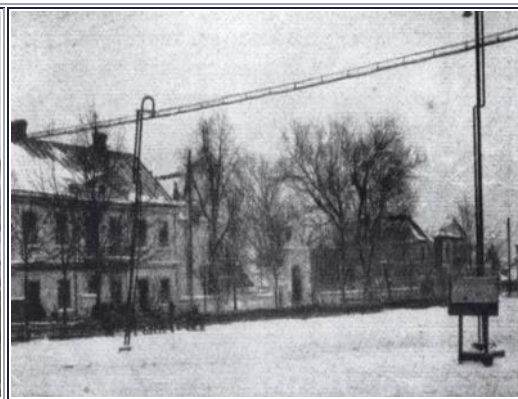
Among the Nazi groups that were stationed in the city there were the Gendarmerie and the Schupo, (German police) who would later be responsible for murdering the Jews of Miedzyrzec. Among the gendarmes was Sergeant Franz Bauer, who personally killed 1000 of the Jewish residents. In the summer of 1940 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. Jewish refugees continually came from Krakow and the surrounding area.

In December 1941 Jews were ordered to hand over all of their fur coats to the Nazi's. Some 20 Jews were murdered on the city streets and another 75 died during the searches that were carried out by Jewish prisoners of War from the Polish army that were specially brought to the city.

On April 19, 1942 Jews were ordered to turn over to the Germans 50 kilograms of gold within 3 days. To show how intent they were on their plan the Gestapo brought in reinforcements from Radzyn who murdered some 40 Jews on the streets.



Ghetto Mezritch . Bazecesca Street



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

On August 25 and 26 the first action occurred. 10,000 Jews were brutally assembled in the town square. They were forcibly marched to the train station where they were put on 52 cattle cars (shipment 566 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.

Some 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 attacked a German officer and threw acid in his face. On that day the entire Judenrat and Jewish police were shot to death.

On May 26 1943, the sixth action occurred. This time some 700 Jews were caught and shipped to different camps. The Germans announced that the city was "Judenrein" (free from Jews). In spite of this the Germans still allowed the Ghetto to partially function and allowed Jews to assemble there. In effect this was a death trap.



Jewish Cemetery

City Center

On July 18-19, 1943, the seventh and last action occurred. As a result of an action by the Polish underground which caused the death of two Germans, the remaining 179 members of the Jewish community of Miedzyrzec were captured and brought to the outskirts of the Piaski where they were shot and buried.

In 1946 their bodies were brought by the Poles to a mass grave in the Jewish cemetery.

On June 26, 1944, after 2 days of battle the city was liberated by the Red Army. Less than 1% of the Jewish population of the city managed to survive the war. None in the town itself. This includes the survivors of the concentration camps, those that moved to Russia just before or during the war, and those who lived in the forests or were hidden by local families under the ground.

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