

Religious and Cultural Life

Synagogues formed the foundation of life in the town and there were a number of them, including Hassidic prayer houses. Although they were primarily places of prayer, they also served as a meeting place for social arguments, exchanges of political opinion, for initiating action on local public affairs, for lectures by delegates from Eretz Israel, Hazanic concerts, meetings, elections and the like.

SYNAGOGUES

The largest of the synagogues was the Great Synagogue, which was destroyed in the First World War. Later, its members began its restoration investing great efforts to make it an impressive structure. Unfortunately, the restoration was not completed before it was totally destroyed in the Second World War.

The Beit HaMidrash or Study Hall was also destroyed in the First World War. Its members, who came from all parts of town, did not consider themselves as belonging to any specific Hassidic group. The Beit HaMidrash was open to all Jews, and enjoyed a particularly warm atmosphere. Among its regular congregants were merchants from the villages and hamlets in the district who came to town on market day. It sometimes seemed that they enjoyed their prayer and study more than the trading and bargaining which followed. Almost any night, a group could be found studying at the Beit HaMidrash late into the night.

The Trisk Hassidic Synagogue was built in the twenties with a donation left in the will of Y. Ehrlich who had died in the United States. There was a very special, social atmosphere in this synagogue. The congregation was very aware not only of spiritual matters, but also of the worldly affairs troubling the Jewish communities. Many youth who came to the synagogue tended to conduct political arguments rather than prayers there. The arguments centred on the Zionist movement, and when the arguments disturbed the religious procedures, the Gabbai would tell the "shkutzim" to be quiet.

Other synagogues included the Zhalibover Synagogue, Das Kashivker Schilchen, the Olikier Hassidic Synagogue.

The town Rabbi was Rabbi Avraham Ber Gitman. He prayed at the Great Synagogue. Rabbi Moshe'le Spector prayed at the Olik Hassidic Synagogue, and in the later years of the Polish rule, kept the registry books of the Jewish community and was considered to be the government Rabbi. People consulted the Rabbis for judgements in matters of Kashrut, in trade and business matters and sometimes even Gentiles would "go to the Rabbi" in order to have an argument between themselves and the Jews settled.

Rabbi Moshe'le Spector spent many years writing "Divrai Moshe", a collection of his sermons over the years. Only one copy



Reb Hershel Ba'al Shem (Rubinstein). He was a Trisker Hassid, one of the respected elders of the town about whom many legends evolved.

of the book remains today, and this is the only remnant of any of the Rozhishch rabbinical families, all of whom perished in the Holocaust.

From time to time preachers would come to town. Notices would be posted in the synagogues giving dates and subjects of their sermons. Most came to obtain donations for Yeshivas or other religious organizations. Some were religious fanatics, preaching "fire and brimstone", warning their listeners of the "depravity" of football, immodest dress and secular thought. Zionism often served as the major target for their attacks.

Particularly well-received among the townsfolk were the Zionist preachers who kept them abreast of what was happening in Eretz Israel. They usually spoke in the Great Synagogue.

Each synagogue had its own cantor, and often visiting cantors would come to town to pray and later sing, giving impressive demonstrations of their talents and skills.

THEATRE IN ROZHISHCH

There were two talented and enthusiastic amateur theatrical groups in town which regularly presented plays by Jewish and other authors. The directors of the groups were talented and totally devoted to the amateur theatricals, and their enthusiasm attracted many youngsters who were anxious to participate in all aspects of these productions.

Although these troupes had started out as one group, they soon parted company. One working mainly for the Folkschule — the leftists, while the other dedicated its income to the Tarbuth school and was considered to be the Zionist troupe.

Every performance became an event in the town, and often became the centre of controversy. The orthodox, in particular, were opposed to this "evil influence" which was attracting the youth in a secular direction away from tradition.

The talents of these two groups, led by Peisi Klimbord and Alter Shames, were praised by professional players who from time to time visited the town.

A WEDDING IN ROZHISHCH

Preparations began about half a year before the date of the wedding, when the tailor, accompanied by six girl assistants, came to start sewing the bride's trousseau and the wedding clothes for members of the family and relatives. As the second stage of preparation, the caterer would arrive with his assistants and cooks to prepare the wedding delicacies. The door of the bride's house seemed never to close in the two or so months before the wedding, when all the relatives and neighbours came to help out with advice, ideas, or just to bother and get into the way.

On the week of the wedding, a kind of family reunion took place. They came from all over the district, bringing and showing off their small children, and the house seemed to have turned into some kind of a fair.



Founders of the theatre in the town:
Alter Shames, Pesach Klimbord and
Yoseph Linden in 1920.



The Rozhishch Klesmer-Kapelle. The Rozhishch orchestra before World War One.

Then the groom's family came to conduct the negotiations over the Nedunia (dowry). A large wedding dinner was given for hundreds of guests in the neighbours' houses all along the length of the street, as there were no halls in those days.

The Chupa was set up out of doors and the Klesmer orchestra played. After the ceremony and the Seven Blessings, the guests dispersed, the family returning home, tired, exhausted and the house looked as though it had been hit by a pogrom. In the town, the jokers, the gossips and the good townspeople continued talking about the wedding, the in-laws, the dowry; each praising or criticizing according to his nature, until the date of the next wedding in the town approached.

NICKNAMES

Almost no one in the town was known by his real name. Nicknames were found for almost everyone. These nicknames could have their basis in the person's city or village of origin; his trade or profession; his parents' names; or his character or physical traits. The humorous nicknames which stuck to some people were often accepted in good humour, but sometimes they did hurt and insult the people involved.

THE BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES (GMILUTH HESED)

In 1935 and 1936 the economic situation in the town worsened. Its two banks closed down. The Polish government, following its anti-semitic policy, levied heavy taxes and restrictions on Jews. There was incitement against them, and the Polish nationalist party picketed Jewish stores throughout Poland to prevent Gentiles buying there. Many shopkeepers and tradesmen were in real financial distress. At this point it was learned in Rozhishch that a Mutual Aid Society operated by the Joint Distribution Committee had been established in Warsaw.

A group met in the Great Synagogue and decided to form a mutual aid society requesting JDC assistance. The Joint consented

to participate with them on a zloty for zloty basis. It was agreed to canvass for members. Each member who paid his monthly fee of half a zloty was entitled to receive a relatively long term loan free of interest when the need arose.

The fund grew as people came to respect it. It was scrupulously managed, and its balances published. By 1938, it had the largest turnover of any such fund in Poland. The fund continued operating until the Russian take-over in 1939. The Soviet regime forbade mutual aid schemes of this nature.

THE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

In Czarist times, Itzik Starosta (Geller) held a position of leadership and was authorized to issue passports and other official documents. Later, the Poles set up an elected Municipal Council, consisting of 11 Jews and 2 Poles, but never permitting a Jew to be mayor.

THE COMMUNITY COUNCIL (KEHILLA)

This council had 8 members elected by the male Jewish population. Its functions were responsibility for ritual slaughtering, maintenance of the cemetery, the community registries and similar matters.

A FEW ROZHISHCH FIGURES AND PERSONALITIES

The town boasted of a number of outstanding personalities. There were those known for their talmudic studies, for their charitable activities, for their generosity, their wealth, their character, and even for their eccentricities. There was **Kolchak**, the local joker, and there was also the village idiot, **Maikey**.



Shmuel Diamandstein and the orphanage committee, with their guest, the Jewish Member of the Polish Parliament (Seim), Dr. Shipper.



We will mention only a few of the respected figures described in greater length in the Hebrew portion of this book.

Reb Eliahu Pfeffer was a figure respected by all factions in the town. The large wholesale house, in which he was a partner, the Cellar, became a town institution, the centre of many philanthropic enterprises, educational and cultural activities. His special interests were welfare and religious causes. His children were all active in the Zionist movement, but he adopted the Yeshiva and its students, encouraging them and giving them counsel, making sure that they had the best teachers available, and concerning himself with the curriculum. It was characteristic of Reb Eli Pfeffer that even in the trying conditions of the Nazi ghetto, he found the spiritual strength to provide encouragement and backing to those around him.

Reb Yisrael Baer Zinyuk was an intellectual with an excellent background in Jewish classics. He had studied in the Volozin Yeshiva which had produced HaRav Kook, Chief Rabbi of Israel, and the poet, Bialik. His home became the meeting centre for local intellectuals. He prayed at the Trisker Synagogue which attracted the intellectually aware among the religious youth. He was not rigid in his religious observance, and would often spend Saturday afternoons taking walks along the Styr, enjoying nature with his friends.

There was also **Reb Avraham Sikiler (Smoliar)**, a man who refused to change with the times. He devoted himself to teaching Talmud and Humash. In the Beit HaMidrash he taught the portion of the week to those coming to the early morning Minyan. He would, of course, accept no payment for this, despite his impoverished circumstances.

The more the world around him changed, the more Avraham Sikiler retreated to his books and his studies. Although he was very proud of his two sons who had immigrated to Eretz Israel as halutzim, and particularly of his son, Eliezer Smoli, the famous Israeli writer, he mourned their rejection of religious observance.



Reb Eliahu Pfeffer

