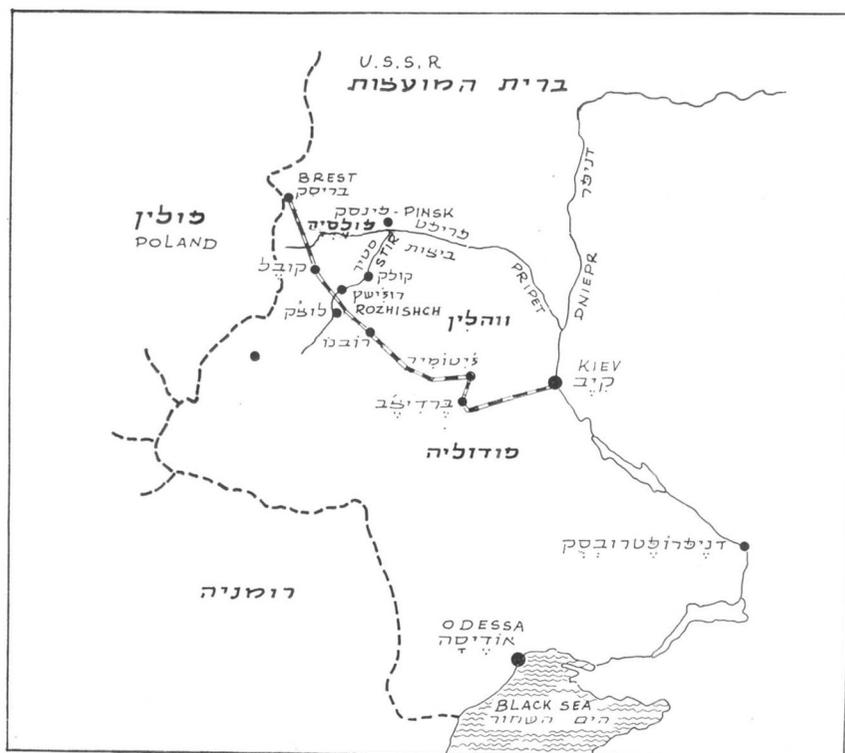


ROZHISHCH IN MEMORIAM

Geography and History

Rozhishch, a small town in the Ukrainian province of Volhynia, is situated on the Styr river, one of the tributaries of the Dnieper, about 12 miles from Lutsk and 30 from Kovel. The town was founded approximately 170 years ago, the 1847 census indicating a Jewish population of 702, rising to 3,169 of a total population of 4,342 fifty years later in 1897. The non-Jewish population was mainly Ukrainian with some German farmers and landowners, and some Poles.



Rozhishch after World War II, in U. S. S. R.

As it was situated in an agricultural district, the major occupations in the town were the marketing of farm crops and dairy products, flour mills, textile mills weaving local wools, and small trades. Rozhishch was a flourishing trade and industrial centre until the outbreak of the First World War, when it was almost completely destroyed and burned down. This caused great suffering to the Jews who were left with no sources of livelihood. There followed the chaotic period immediately after World War One, when Polish rule for the district was determined, and only then did the Jews begin to return to rebuild and restore the city and the sparkling life in it. The population again rose to some 5,000.

THE TOWN

Rozhishch was a town having one main street, which ran down its centre. The market place was in the middle of the town. From this square the roads branched off, to the east to the town's wooden bridge (Untern-Brick), to the south to the road leading to Lutsk, and to the north to a more residential quarter built on the hill (Of'n Barg), and westward leading to the farm villages and hamlets of the hinterland.

Although the central part of the town was densely populated with the buildings crowding each other and people living in the quarters behind their businesses, the more suburban areas, and particularly the southern quarter near the railroad tracks were more prosperous, with cultivated gardens and fruit orchards.



MARKET DAY

Monday was market day. Farmers from the entire region would stream into town with their carts and their produce, and the marketplace together with the neighbouring streets were teeming with people, sacks of grain, vegetables, poultry, fruit etc. The livestock market, separate from the main fair, was situated in the northern part of the town.

Bustling, lively noisy activity was the mood of the day. The Jews buying agricultural products from the Gentile farmers, and the farmers trading in the Jewish shops for locally made goods, shoes, clothing, household wares, etc., and of course, the "wee drop" of vodka to lighten the soul. Trading and bargaining were brisk and vocal.

At that time it seemed that this was the natural order of things; the Ukrainian farmers supplying the products of the good black earth to the Jewish urban population, which in turn, supplied them with all the innovations of modern trade and industry, and that this order would continue to the end of time. Although the relations between the town Jews and the rural Christian farmers were not particularly hearty, that they would ever reach the degree of hatred which was sparked by the first slightest hint on the part of the Nazis was unimaginable.

SPRING

As Rozhishch was a rural centre, life in the town changed its character with the seasons of the year. Spring marked rebirth after the melting of the snows and the ice. The town became radiant with cherry, pear and apple blossoms. The air was fragrant with lilac. But spring sometimes brought its own problems with it. The Styr would overflow; its waters covering the grass and at times even flooding the low-lying homes at the edge of town. Horses and cows grazing at the riverbank would get stuck in the mud, and it was a common sight to see friends and neighbours pulling and tugging with all their might at ropes in an effort to free the animals.

PESSACH

Passover, a springtime festival, was preceded by preparations going back into the winter with the fattening of the geese. Shoshana Ziniuk Zaltzman recalls that her home resembled a factory on the evening the geese were slaughtered — with all the family gathering, some to pluck the fowl and others to cut it up into portions. But the real preparations for the feast began on the day after Purim with the beets being prepared for the passover borscht and the eggs being collected and put away and the matzoth being baked. Cupboards, and most particularly food cupboards, were taken out of doors and given a thorough cleaning. Copper and silverware were taken to a central spot, where the women and girls of the neighbourhood gathered in sweaty competition to outdo each other in shining these utensils. The stove was "kashered" for Pesach one or two days before the feast and pots and pans placed into cauldrons of boiling water and glassware soaked in the bathtub for three days.

On Seder morning the kitchen, of course, was the hub of feverish activity. All the traditional delicacies were being prepared, including the most eagerly awaited of all — the Kneidlach (matzah balls).



Shimon-Yossel, the carter (pheyton), as photographed by Alter Katzizna, and published in an art photography album.

And finally, the Seder itself. The table beautifully set — the festive air — the family all united. All the symbols of the age-old ritual marking the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery. And indeed, all sitting together, following the prescribed order (seder means order), they again felt a sense of freedom around the Passover table.

SUMMER

Shavuoth was a late-spring, early summer festival. For Shavuoth the children would pick the greenery and reeds which custom demanded for the holiday and make it a point to see that they were distributed to all the townsfolk and the synagogues. When on the eve of Shavuoth the river banks were muddy, the boys would strip off their pants and wade out to gather the "lepeches" (reeds) required for the occasion.

Summer was marked by the ripening of the grain crops. The river became the centre of activity, particularly for the youth enjoying the summer vacation after a hard year of study at school, often accompanied by the hardships of studying away from home in most impoverished conditions. The youngsters relaxed, rowing on the calm blue Styr, watching the green banks on either side of them and listening to the chirping of the birds overhead. Swimming races were organized by the municipality for the Polish National Day. Occasionally, large boats, towed by huge strong peasants on foot could be seen on the river, passing through on to their destinations in Pinsk and Lutsk. One wondered whether these barges laden heavily with sacks of wheat and grain would ever reach their destinations.

The hub of activity on hot afternoons, and especially on Friday afternoons and Saturdays was the wooden bridge area. Youthful hi-jinks, horseplay, courting, and the well-tanned muscular Misha Korn, showing off by jumping off the bridge into the water to the great admiration of the children, were all part of the activities at the river's edge.



On a boat on the Styr

Tisha-B'av was the day of solemnity, fasting and mourning. The pre-fast meal usually consisted of broad noodles (lockshen) cooked in milk, after which the men would go to the synagogue wearing cloth mourning shoes, while the women, after calling to each other, "women, come and cry", would sit on the floor and keen, loudly mourning the destruction of the Second Temple. But the children, being children, exploited their elders' preoccupations for gathering balls of hay to throw in the hair of the town's eligible maidens.

AUTUMN

Autumn was the season of the heavy rains and the mud. It was also the season of the High Holidays, and Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, was the most sacred of all. The atmosphere of the Day

of Judgement began being felt several days before. The white hens which were to serve as "Kappora" — to take on the sins of the members of the family, were prepared, and when the time came, each person would fling the chicken round over his head (kapores).

In the Ziniuk home, which typified the great majority of Jewish homes, the father made his atonement at midnight, using his rooster, his voice choked with tears and emotion. The house was filled with awe. The following morning, no one worked. The men studied Gemorrah, the women busy in the kitchen. By late afternoon the atmosphere was tense. Relatives and neighbours came to ask forgiveness for the wrongs done the family in the course of the year. Weeping filled the house. The table was set for the pre-fast meal. The father blessed each member of the family individually. The parents went to the synagogue. The atmosphere was so solemn that the children felt that even a fish in water would shudder on Kol Nidre night.

But not all the autumn feasts were solemn. There was also Simchat Torah — the Hakafot in the synagogues, with the townspeople afterwards continuing the celebrations in private homes where, among all the special delicacies served, was vodka heated with pepper and honey. The atmosphere was gay — all singing and dancing, particularly the Hassidim, whose synagogues were crammed to overflowing, the elders dancing around the Torah. Women and children kissing the Torah and the joy was boundless, with drinking on this occasion being a Mitzvah.

WINTER

Winter was cold, with snow and ice covering the ground. In winter the Styr changed its aspect completely, with youngsters skating on its icy surface, and out-of-town farmers were able to pass over it with their wagons, not having to use the bridge. Large blocks of ice were hewn out of the river and brought to a special cellar near the great Synagogue where they were kept to use in the summer or for storing medications. Heavy winter clothing and the ice made navigation in winter difficult, and so this was the indoor season. People tried to spend as much time as possible indoors, huddled around wood-burning stoves. Long winter evenings provided the ideal setting for study in the different synagogues and organizations; for the exchange of political ideas — communism — bundism — for sharing the dream of Zionism and of course, for just plain social exchange.

There were many wells in the town. Water was to be found almost anywhere you dug down 10 yards, and most of it was good for drinking. It was brought to the surface in a pail fastened by a chain to a post which was rolled up by a handle or pumped up.

The most famous of the wells was the Krenitze — the spring. Here people could come and draw water up in a pail directly from the cold spring. The water was fresh, cool, soul-satisfying. Although



the Krenitze did not freeze over in the winter, it was hard to get at because of the slippery ice.

The town changed its character on Shabbat and the holidays. All the shops were closed. In every home there was meat, fish, challa and a cholent in the stove. All dressed up for the holidays and the Gentiles did not come into town. Most of the Jews earned their livelihood in trade and there were hundreds of small shopkeepers, craftsmen and artisans. As a rule, people just made a living, and only a few were better off. There were no really wealthy people in the town at all, The Polish authorities levied very heavy taxes.

Rozhishch after
World War II

