Yurevichi, Belarus

An oasis in the marshlands of Polesia, Yurevichi was a small town surrounded by forests and the Pripyat Marshes and dominated by a rain-soaked autumn, a harsh, snow-covered winter and a flooded, swampy spring that rendered the region virtually impassable for most of the year. Located 168m above sea level near an important East-West trade route between Poland and the Black Sea, the town was pillaged and destroyed by Mongols and Tartars in the medieval period and invaded and occupied by Napoleonic, Russian, German, Bolshevik and Polish forces during modern times.

This is the story of the Jewish community in Yurevichi as it existed prior to World War II.

Alternative Names

English
- Yurovichi, Yuravitch [1]
- Jurewicz, Jurevice [2]
- Iurovichi [3]

Russian
- Юровичи [4], Юрьевичи [5]

Belorussian
- Юравічы [6]

Polish Kingdom
- Jurewicze [7], Juravicy

Yiddish
- [8] יוראָוויצע

Not the Same As

Jurowce
- Located in the Gmina Wasilków district, within Białystok County, Podlaskie Voivodeship, in north-eastern Poland

Other Identifiers

Coordinates
- 51°57' N, 29°32' E [9]

Kagen Number
- 4055 [10]

Beginnings of the Jewish Community

Yurevichi's written history begins around 1430, during the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The neighboring region was a land of forests and swamps with scattered small villages and subsistence farmers. Its inhabitants were ancestors of the eastern Slavs who settled the region during the time of the Kievan Rus'. The greater territory was known as *Belaia* Rus', or “White Russia”, which is in present-day Belarus.

The Wild East

During the 1300s, Lithuanian dukes expanded their territory eastward towards Moscow and southwards towards the Black Sea, enriching themselves through taxes, customs duties, leasing mills and taverns and exporting grains and timber from their new lands. At the height of their power in the

1500 and 1600s, court life at home was lavish while the eastern and southern territories were in a state of perpetual war against Tartars, Crimean Cossacks and Muscovy.

Financing their grand lifestyles at home and wars at the border, the dukes sold rights to collect future income from taxes, customs duties and leases in exchange for an advance payment. This factoring offer was available to all inhabitants, including Jews. However, farmers, landowners and rich burghers were strongly attached to their land, which was their source of wealth, food, shelter and clothing. These locals pursued trade and business when it occurred near their towns and properties; they were uninterested in the eastern territories where personal peril and financial risks were high.

Prohibited from owning land, Jews were unencumbered by the same caution and immobility. Entrepreneurial, agile and mobile, Lithuanian Jews were the ones willing to fund the dukes' present-day needs in exchange for rights to collect the treasure's income in the remote, undeveloped and hostile territories in the east. The success of such ventures required solidarity, joint investment and the pooling of capital. These are the business and financial models of a joint stock company, and the personal characteristics of wealth creators. These ventures were lucrative.

Joining these early Jewish collectors and leaseholders were merchants searching for raw materials, such as timber. Following the Pripyat river, they visited towns such as Mazyr and Pinsk in southern Belarus.

First Settlements

In 1510 Yurevichi became the manorial estate of Bogdan Serbinavu, an official to King Sigismund I the Elder. It was likely operated as a folwark, a serfdom-based farm producing grain for export. Exporting grain was important to the economy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and more profitable than collecting rents and taxes from small-scale farmers. Yurevichi's location on the Pripyat river would have offered efficient water transport to markets in Poland and Western Europe, making Serbinavu's agricultural enterprise financially viable.

Economic activity and Jewish life flourished in the first half of the 1600s in Belarus towns such as Rechitsa and likely extended to Yurevichi. Noble landowners leased parts of their estates to Jews, especially those associated with grain production. Jews worked in milling grain, distilling alcohol and selling vodka.

Life in Belarus became untenable in the second half of the 1600s with the start of religious wars of the Orthodox against the Jews and Catholics. During the war of 1654-1667, almost all of Belarus was captured by Muscovy, whose policy was to annihilate non-Orthodox faiths in lands they seized. Over half of the Belarus population perished. Yurevichi, along with other towns on the south eastern border, were wiped out.

The Jews of Yurevichi were Litvaks.

Decline of The Duchy of Lithuania

At great cost and effort, the territory was retaken by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the early 1660s. Jews and Christians began returning to the region after the war's end in 1667. A wooden monastery built in 1683 by Catholic Jesuits in Yurevichi attests to the region's safety from slaughter by Orthodox Crimean Cossacks and Muscovite czars.

- region was lightly populated and impoverished

The first permanent Jewish community in Yurevichi developed sometime in the 1700s.

- Jewish census of 1789 (probably used in population figures). but Census was used to tax Jews; likely undercounted because Jews hid.
- Jewish population in Rechitsa did not increase over a quarter century because Jews were migrating from the town to privately owned vilalges, which offered greater possibilities for earning a living through trade, leading lad.

By the late-1700s, the community included six tailors, two butchers and one shoemaker and can be considered a *mestechko*, a Jewish shtetle somewhere in size between a town and village.

- owners of mestechkos attracted Jews to develop local ecoomy
- Principal occupation of Jews: distilling alcohol, selling bodka, leasing various sectors of nobile's estates
- lightly populated and impoverished towns could not guarantee living for Jews in towns
- Jews paid taxes and gave “gifts” to owners, churche, etc. paid property taxes

- Stanislaus August gave privileges to the town in 1778; what does give privileges mean?
- coming of craftsmen: smiths
- importance of timber trade
- leasing mills/inns??
- Decline of the Lithuanian economy, rise of merchants and crafts
- Last third of 1700s, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth suffered econoonmic decliene; implications for Jews
- Economy impoverished. Christian population creates laws to restricute compeition from Jews. Jews had to seek new ways to earn a living. They became extremely active in commerce, competing with Chritians and one another. Economic activity in 1600-1650; political and social decline until end of 1700s. economic and social status of Jews detiorated likewise.

Litvaks

Inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were called Litvins. Lithuanian Jews became known as Litvaks. These were the Lithuanian-Belarus Jews that migrated eastwards as entrepreneurs in the 1500 and 1600s and became the merchants and craftsmen of the 1700 and 1800s.

Litvaks were “characterized by rationalism in behavior, a thirst for learning, a businesslike approach to work, purposefulness. …”[11] They did not wear long-skirted garments. They cut their hair without side-locks. Men consulted their wives in important matters, including business. Their pursuit of learning included the study of secular sciences. Litvak rabbis and *melameds*[12] were regarded as the best experts in Jewish scholarship.

Transition to the Kingdom of Poland

As the Grand Duchy of Lithuania weakened, the power of Poland in the Commonwealth increased.

- Growing importance of Catholics
- Jesuit mission

Transition from Polish to Russian Empire

- Initially a status quo. Economic situation was bad since 1650s. CathII lifts taxes on Minsk Province (except customs duties) until 1795.Next impoverishment
- Polish language was viewed as language of elite (landowners); Belorus language considered “countrified”. Russian language seen as foreign.
- Attempts to convert new lands to Orthodoxy, but Catholicism, Uniate Church and Lithuanian-Polish culutre deeploy rooted in the east Slavic population
- new taxes on property and commerce
- ban on ownership of property in rural areas
- increased difficulty of entrepreneurship
- compeititon in crafts and trade

Second Partition of Poland

- Catherine the Great takes over lands. Russia tried to keep Jews out of Russian lands, but now inherits the large Jewish population of Grand Duchy. Start of the Pale of Settlement.
- relative religious tolerance in Belarus changes to suppression of non-Orthodox religions and submission to the Moscow czars.
- Yurevichi becomes part of Rechitsa Uezd and part of the Minsk Province (Gubernia)
- Initially, not much change. CathII needs support of Polish szlachta. Includes freedom of travel to Warsaw an

War of 1812

- quartering of French soldiers in Jewish homes. Conflicts with lighting fires on the Sabbeth.

Tax Collections

- Rise in tax collection from Jews
- Kosher meat tax: initial use to support jewish community. 1825 law. Under Russian authority, used to support city. Results in increase in meat prices, decrease in consumption and undernourishment. Role of factoring continues: right to collect tax for 4 years, at a discount. Collection in Rechitsa and Iurovichi indicates that the tax revenue was high enough to support this factoring. Iurovichi must have been a substantial mestochko. 1840-1843: Nison/Leiba Feigin collet tax. (grnadson of well-known tsadik Shender of Iurovichi, son of social activist, rabbi and merchant Litman (Motel) Feigin). (P.182.) Nison Feigin unable to collect; property auctioned. Initially a tax to fund Jewish rebuilding after Cossack attacks; userped by Russians as a tax to maintain city.
- Candle tax

Commerce

- Drinking establishments provide largest source of income

Compulsory Military Service

- started in 1827. cantonists. Kahals responsible for recruits.

Notable Figures

Feigin family, including Litman (motel) Feigin.

Russification

- attempt to minimize influence of Polish culsture and Jewish economic role
- closing of Catholic monasteries and opening Orthodox ones
- Conscription at age 8 to serve 25 years from age 18. “cantonists”.

==== Emancipation of the Serfs ===-

- attempt to diffuse hostility to monarchy; attempt to win support of peasants by Russian tsar
- purchased by merchant Bakunienki (3400mr) (in 1800s?)
- rise in standards of living

Notes

- Conflict with Catholics. destruction of Jesuit church. Conversion of the church to Orthodox.
- Commonwealth granted considerable autonomy to Jews
- Catholic presence…Orthodox
- Oskierky estate

End of the Russian Empire

- start of pogroms in 1880s.
- View of Jewish merchants and manufacturers as exploiters.
- new regulations against Jews settling in rural areas or owning and renting property there
- result in Jewish population without means to support themselves and families if they lived outside the mestechkos
- forced out of villages into “meschekos” as a way to concentrate Jewish population. Result was in competition between Jewish merchants and crafts (too many blacksmiths for a town) and inability to make a living. Impoverishment.

Soviet Terror

German Terror

The End of the Jewish Community

- Property of missing/dead Jews taken by townspeople for own homes, building materials or town buildings

[1)] , [2)] , [9)]

Source: Where Once We Walked

[3)]

Source: The Long Life and Swift Death of Jewish Rechitsa, page 54.

[4)]

Source: Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary

[5)]

Jewish Encyclopedia in Russian

[6)]

Source: Гарады і вёскі Беларусі: Энцыклапедыя - Towns and Villages in Belarus: An Encyclopedia

[7)]

Source: Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Polish and other Slavic Countries

[8)] , [10)]

Source: Hebrew Subscription Lists

[11)]

The Long Life and Swift Death of Jewish Rechitsa, Page 29.

[12)]

Jewish school teacher

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Last update: **2023/03/05 02:57**