



Source: Piesk & Most; Jehuda Borowski

G E O G R A P H Y A N D L I F E I N P I E S K

The little town of Piesk is situated in a plain, surrounded by lakes and forest, a dense network of rivers, streams, grassland, ornamental trees and orchards of all varieties. The river Zelbianka crosses its center. Its eastern and northern parts are in the plain, while its southern part lies on high ground. This includes Napoleon Hill. The story goes that Napoleon ordered the local population to raise an embankment to protect his withdrawal from Russia, and thus the hill came to its name. Piesk is naturally divided into three sectors, each of which lies on a waterway.

SCHULHOIF SECTOR

The southeastern part lies along the canal, from the flourmills and the bathhouse, along the water, up to the sluice gate of the "Tameh" canal. To the north-east is the "atz" and the Jewish cemetery. The northeastern part, next to the Schul, starts at the house of **Malka SHEVAH (di Schneiderke)**, continues from the well along the length of the street and approaches Zelbianka River, which meanders and flows in the direction of the Perkop Bridge and the township of Mosti.

PERKOP SECTOR

This sector starts at the flourmills. Its southern part – the market place, the Orthodox Church and the entire length of the street which was inhabited by Christians, up to the Perkop bridge leading to Mosti – is not far from the Zelbianka river.

ZARETZ SECTOR

In southeastern part continues from the well eastward up to Tori village and lies on the canal. The south-western part stretches from the well westward to the Christian cemetery and lies on the canal. Through this sector goes the road leading to Volkovysk.

GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF PIESK

The township lies in the middle of forests, grassland, orchards and ornamental trees. It is surrounded by waterways on all sides, and lies on the cross-roads: Vilna - to the north, Warsaw – to the south, Grodno – to the west and Minsk – to the east. Due to this geographical position, the area was fortified in every war and became the theatre of heavy fighting, resulting in the burning of the little towns, including Piesk. At the beginning of the 20th century, even before roads connected Piesk with the provincial towns and the railway station was situated 12 km. from the town, Piesk knew economic growth thanks to its location on the intersection of several main roads. There was much movement. People passed through or stopped over. Some stayed on. Among the latter, there were mainly merchants attending the fair and the markets. Piesk lies astride the stream Zelbianka, which is about 100 km. long. Its headwaters are in the springs near Rozonoy, and it joins the Neman in Zelbian. Piesk is 7 km. distant from the Neman. It can be assumed that the origins of Piesk were in the Schulhoif sector, not far from Zelbianka whose waters were used. This was probably around the end of the 13th century or the beginning of the 14th century. In the "Yizkor" book of Volkovysk (volume 1, page 9), one of the streets mentioned in 1507 is called Piesk Street.

THE CANAL

At the end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th, the canal was built to the east of the town, in a westward direction. It is 4.5 km. long, 60-70 m. wide and 3-5 m. deep. This canal divided the town in two. The northern sector is called Perkop, meaning "across the excavation." The southern sector is called Zaretz, meaning "across the stream." It is said that the canal was built by Count Potozki himself, or by one of his relatives, as all the land belonged to this family. The late Israel Shebach, the "Magid" of Piesk, participated to a large extent in financing the project. After the flourmills were built on the canal bridge, they were leased to him and remained in the family until around 1920. The canal served a twofold purpose: 1. to cheapen transportation of trees from the forest to the east of the Neman. Until then, trees were transported by cart overland, which was very expensive. 2. The four mills. After the completion of the canal, a bridge was built over it to permit crossing from one part of the locality to the other. Next to the bridge, a waterfall was built which operated two flourmills. The four mills were important to Piesk whose population had grown by the end of the 19th century to about 2500 souls. They also served the entire region, which counted scores of villages with a population of several thousands.

PIESK AND MOSTI JEWS IN THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

Piesk and Mosti youth were active in the movement that aspired at undermining the despotic rule in Czarist Russia and carry out a socialist revolution among the harassed and oppressed Russian people. In the year 1905, as a result of the helplessness of the police, discipline in the government institutions slackened. A general relaxation ensued, and the parties could wage their propaganda quite openly. As a rule, the youngsters met in the forests around the township. Under cover of the dense foliage, they would study the pamphlets and instructions received from Volkovysk and Grodno, and plan future activities. Members of rival organizations would meet at the time of the fairs and on market days on the square in front of the Orthodox Church. Every part had its meeting place where its followers gathered and where reading material received from Volkovysk, Bialystok, and Vilna was kept. The main publications were the Arbeiter Stimme of the Bund and the "Najer Weg" of the S.S. - Party. Despite the contradictions and the quarrels, they were all work-mates; and a spirit of fraternity reigned among them. After all, they had the same objective: to eradicate the tyrannical rule of the Czar. The revolutionary-socialist ideas reached the masses in the synagogues and places of worship, the speakers exhorting the congregation enveloped in their prayer shawls. The Schulhoif was a central meeting place; and it is told that it contained an arms cache for self-defense purposes. In the year 1905, on the second day of Pesach, party members of Piesk and Mosti arrived at the Schulhoif and surrounded the congregation leaving the synagogue. Fiery speeches were held against the Czar and the monarchy, while party guards patrolled with drawn pistols, even shooting in the air; and the police kept at a distance. For May Day 1905, the party members were ordered to assemble in the district capital Volkovysk for a demonstration. But as a result of the pogroms that had resumed throughout the country with the encouragement of the government, this plan did not materialize. The Bund members did not go to Volkovysk, while the S-S-party followers returned to Piesk and held a meeting in the Strovnitza forest. Afterwards, they marched through all the streets of the town while a reinforced police guard kept order, but did not disturb the demonstration. The father of the author, who had served 4 years in the army, often recalled with pain and regret how he tried to dissuade the young boys and girls from revolting. He appeared at the Strovnitza meeting, and told of the Czar's powerful army, with its cavalry and artillery. He thought that the hope to overthrow Czar Nicholai was nothing but self-deception. A tourist who arrived in Israel for a visit, in 1925 also told what happened during those days. The late **Mordechai NARDOVSKI** brought this tourist to the Piesk group in Affula, where he stayed some three weeks. The tourist's name was **Benjamin LEV**, but they called him "Numke der Yossem fun Mosti". In 1905, he was 16 years old and studied in Piesk. He was a robust boy and joined the "Schwester un Brider" organization. Their meeting place was halfway between Piesk and Mosti, underneath a gigantic centenarian tree than seemed to have been planted there especially for this purpose. Numke was a capable and active member of the organization. One day, he was summoned to the house of **Noach BOROVSKI**, the leader of the group. He was told that he had to demand 500 rubles for the organization's treasure from **Kopel WEINSTEIN**, the richest man in town. Surmounting his fear, he went to the Weinstein mansion and gave his message. The reaction was shock and anger. How dare he address the "gvir" --who ruled in the entire

district and was blindly obeyed by the police--with such effrontery, and demand 500 rubles? **Kopel WEINSTEIN** called for his eldest daughter and ordered her to summon the town commander and have Numke the Orphan arrested. Numke was well known in town and on certain days had been a guest at the Weinstein table. And then, something interesting happened. The boy drew a pistol and told the "gvir" in a quiet but clear voice that he would not hesitate to shoot. Needless to say, the daughter hastened to bring the 500 rubles.

This story is typical of the Piesk and Mosti youth who, at times, had to extort money for their revolutionary activities. **Benjamin LEV** told a great many more stories, all of them illustrating the devotion to the ideals and the striving for a better and more just regime, a socialist world that would put an end to the hunger of the masses. The Piesk and Mosti youngsters made every effort for the Russian Revolution. But they failed, were arrested and broken. The police brought in Cossack regiments who combed the woods and searched every home. The responsible leaders were deported to Siberia. Some were lucky to escape arrest, crossed the border, and reached more hospital countries. Others simply disappeared and were never again heard of. Today, looking back, we can fully appreciate the Piesk and Mosti youngsters who sacrificed themselves for their ideals. One of the S.S.-party leaders in Piesk, in 1905, was the late **Yakov ASTRINSKI**, the uncle of **Devora REITBORD**. **Astrinski** was responsible for the villages in the Piesk district. He used to visit the Gentiles and try to induce them to overthrow the despotic rule of the Czar. These Gentiles were very bad off, especially those who worked for the big landowners, and were exploited like in the Middle Ages. **Astrinski** explained to them the principles of Socialism, how it was possible to work less and still live better on this earth. All they had to do was to overthrow the despotic rulers. As an example, he told the landless peasants that if the estate of the landowner Brisfing was to be parceled out, hundreds of farmers could earn their livelihood on it. The peasants greatly admired **Astrinski** and said that men like him could bring deliverance to them and to future generations. They were ready to follow him through fire and water. One day, after a fiery speech in the market place, **Astrinski's** father came home and said:

"My dear son, we are surrounded by armed police. If you try to escape, they'll shoot you, so you better surrender." **Yakov ASTRINSKI** was extremely clever but of small build and very thin. He told his wife to put on a very wide dress, to sit down in the corner and start knitting. She did as he bid her; and he hid under the dress. The police entered the house, searched everywhere, even in the straw in the loft and in all the closets, but did not find him. At night, **Astrinski** escaped from the house, walked all the way to the Mosti railway station and traveled to Grodno. He crossed the Russian border, arrived in Eastern Germany and from there continued to the United States where he settled.

THE SCHULHOIF SECTOR

This area, which differed from the two other sectors and was the oldest part of the township, had, in the year 1920, 404 Jewish inhabitants. The neighborhood was

ancient, pleasant and attractive. It was unique in that all the synagogues were concentrated there, as well as the cultural life of the community. The houses, though well kept and in good repair, were partly sunken into the ground and very old. These houses had low doors and small windows. The alleys were narrow. This area was well liked, also because the descendants of the original dwellers, had grown up to become courageous youngsters who protected the little town and upheld the Jewish traditions. At the time of the early settlers, before the canal was dug, they used to carry water from the Zelbianka river, and firewood from the nearby forests.

THE SCHULHOIF AND THE SYNAGOGUES

The Schulhoif, literally Schul Court or Schul Square, was a square piece of land of about 10-12 dunam. At the eastern end stood the Piesk Schul, a tall and beautiful structure, a real temple. Prayers were held in summer, especially during the High Festivals. The halls were spacious and held hundreds of men and women, in separate areas, of course. The furniture was as magnificent as the temple itself. The acoustics were perfect, and when handsome and well-groomed **Cantor MERMINSKI** led the prayers with his choir in front of the Holy Ark, his singing moved every soul. The worshippers felt that their prayers went straight to heaven, to the Almighty, and that the New Year would be a better one than the one just ending.

THE BET MIDRASH

At the southern end of the square, next to the Schul, stood the wooden Bet Midrash (der holzener Beth Midrash). It was always crowded with worshippers, mainly from the middle classes. A separate room served as Talmud Torah for pupils in the lower grades. Next to the Bet Midrash was the modern bakery of **SHUSHE the BAKER**; and during the intervals, pupils would treat themselves to his tasty rolls.

THE NEW MAGNIFICENT SYNAGOGUE

Slightly to the north of the Bet Midrash stood the red brick Synagogue (der Moier). It was probably built around the end of the 18th century; and the two Rabbis of the town officiated there, at either side of the Holy Ark. On the right -- left – **Rabbi Shimon BENJAMIN**. Each of the Rabbis had his own followers in town; and at times disputes broke out between the sides. But peace would soon be restored, as the Rabbis were not interested in dissension. On the upper floor of the synagogue was a beautiful women's gallery. On the ground floor was a special room serving as Talmud Torah for the higher grades. Pupils completing three years of studies there would then leave for the Yeshivot in the larger towns where they could continue their training for the Rabbinate. The Piesk Talmud Torah, at the beginning of the 20th century, was the main school, not counting some 6 "heders" with private teachers. The Piesk congregation kept the Talmud Torah. From this Talmud Torah, the 14-15 year- olds would enter

Yeshivot in Slonim, Grodno, Slabotka, and others. **RABBI MORDECHAI AMIEL (der Rabbi Motke Rasher)** headed the Talmud Torah.

"CHAYEI ADAM"

Behind the red brick synagogue stood the wooden Bet Midrash called "Chayei Adam", built around the middle of the 19th century. The worshippers there were the common people, the artisans and the laborers of Piesk.

The Rabbi was **LEIB BER**, an imposing personality. In order not to desecrate the holiness of his calling, he refused to be paid, and no one knew from what he lived. He was a brilliant scholar; and in case of a dispute, his verdict was unreservedly accepted. His life work was the "Chayei Adam" study circle and a study group of Psalms. These groups met mostly in winter. All the artisans and the proletariat participated, as they enjoyed the company and the teachings of **Rabbi Leib Ber**. As a result of these study groups, the common people knew their Psalms by heart. A carpenter, tailor or cobbler would quote whole chapters and verses. It was even said that the Neman boatmen talked in "Psalm language." All this did not, of course, happen overnight. **Rabbi Leib Ber** devoted his entire life to it. In appreciation, the Synagogue of Piesk Congregation in New York is named for him. In Israel, a corner of Kiryat Haim Synagogue bears his name. A grandson of **Rabbi Leib Ber, MORSTEIN**, lives in Israel.

THE HASSIDIC BET MIDRASH

Opposite "Chayei Adam" was a small building (de Hassidim Stibel) that hardly contained all the worshippers. There was always joyful singing; and from time to time, Hasidim from neighboring localities convened in Piesk, enhancing joy in town.

"TIFERET BAHURIM"

On the left of the Schul was "Tiferet Bahurim". The founder was **Shraga TZIN (Feive the tailor)**, a scholar, just, energetic and kind-hearted. He was the father of the four **TZIN** sisters who all live in Israel--three in Kiryat Haim and one in Herzliah. "Tiferet Bahurim" served mainly the Piesk youngsters who did not find their place in the other synagogues. They thought that the adults discriminated against them, not allowing them to be called to the Torah. Therefore, **Shraga TZIN** brought together the Piesk youth and found for them a rent-free room at **Malka the Schneiderke's** [seamstress]. There, the young generation felt free. It was tragic that **Shraga TZIN** died so young. The entire town was shocked when news arrived that he had been killed in a road accident at thirty-five.

MINYANIM

There were about 6 or so minyanim in private homes, as especially during the winter snow storms it was hard to reach the synagogues from the outlying neighborhoods. But during the High Holidays and all the Festivals, service was held in the synagogues exclusively and never in the private minyanim.

THE BATH HOUSE

The Piesk bathhouse was built in the 19th century on the river, apparently after the canal was dug. The ritual bathhouse was open all the year round. As a rule, entire families went bathing, parents with their children. This was particularly the case on Thursdays and Fridays. They would stay for hours in the bathhouse, and return home clean and refreshed. The bathhouse contributed immensely to the health of the community, as in those days, private homes had no hot showers. It stood under the supervision of the municipality and functioned perfectly. During the German occupation of 1915- 18, the bathhouse served the army only. But on some Fridays, the military would allow part of the civilian population to use it. The bathhouse was open all the year round, but used mainly in winter. During the summer months, people preferred bathing in the river.

THE HEKDESH

The Hekdesh housed scores of travelers, some of them staying for months. These people, wandering from place to place, were ill, embittered and downhearted. Very often quarrels broke out among them; and peace had to be restored. At times, the Rabbi of the Talmud Torah would undertake the role of peacemaker. A Piesk family who lived in the Hekdesh took care of the order and often mediated between newcomers and old-timers, as the latter claimed to be entitled to more privileges than the former. **Gabbai JOSEPH LEIB** supervised on behalf of the Congregation. Pious women took care of the guests with great devotion. They would collect food and clothes, especially for the children, some of whom were half-naked. All the inhabitants endeavored to help these poor, although most of them were far from comfortable themselves. They did it because of the desire to help the weak was deeply rooted in their souls.

THE CEMETERY

The cemetery was very large, contained hundreds of graves and was proof of the existence of the community for many centuries. At the beginning of the 20th century, an additional piece of land was purchased; and the cemetery was enlarged. Thus, enough space was prepared for the next two hundred years. Indeed, the Jews of Piesk believed that they would go on living, and dying, in their town. But by the middle of the 20th century, most of them had been exterminated, and were not laid to rest in their own cemetery. Only a few succeeded in escaping the claws of the Nazis and immigrated to other lands.

LEGENDS AND TALES

Many legends and tales were told about the Schulhoif. The main theme was that nothing bad could possibly happen there. In other places, evil spirits would roam freely at night and disappear only with the ringing of the morning bells. True, the inhabitants never heard these bells--but the spirits did. The only place the spirits did not dare approach was the Schulhoif as they well knew that they could not succeed. Even the most terrifying thunder and lightning could never harm the people and the buildings of the Schulhoif sector. As a matter of fact, lightning usually struck the water long before it could reach the Schulhoif. And just as the evil spirits, thunder and lightning--wild beasts too feared to approach the Schulhoif sector.

THE PERKOP SECTOR

This sector was built in the 17th or 18th century. In 1920, there were 38 Jews and 150 Christians living there. The sector had one street, 2.5 km long, from the flour mill on the canal bridge as far as the Perkop bridge on the Zelbianka river northwards, in the direction of Mosti. The street was wide, with large houses standing in the midst of fruit trees. A narrow path led to the Catholic Church. To the east, behind the Orthodox Church, there was an open space of some 30 dunam, where fairs and markets were held. The fair took place on the 25th of each month and the market every Sunday.

ROW OF SHOPS

In the shops, next to the Orthodox Church, many articles were sold. As a rule, women did the selling.

THE WELL

In the center of the square, its main importance was on fair and market days when water was drawn for humans and animals alike.

HEBREW SCHOOL

Perkop sector boasted a Hebrew elementary school named "Tarbut", founded in Piesk after World War I by the following: **Yitzhak SHAPIRO**, who was killed by the Nazis but whose two daughters live in Israel; **Zidel SHEVACH**, killed by the Nazis; **Leibe LUNSKI**, who lives in Canada but remained a faithful Zionist and is a frequent visitor to

Israel; **CHAZANOWSKI**, who lived in Peru but also visited Israel; Yehezkel LISOWSKI, who lives in Israel; the late **Avigdor DACHOWSKI** who founded a family in Israel; and **Zami KAPLAN**, whose three grandchildren live in Israel. This seven-man group devoted itself whole-heartedly to the establishment of the Hebrew school. Some of them were teachers and actually taught in the school while additional teachers were engaged from outside. The school was of a high standard and gave the youth of the town tuition and culture.

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

This church, the "Tzerkeve", stands at the northeastern end of the square. It was built from fine bricks and is surrounded by a beautiful hedge. Every Sunday, and on Christian holidays, the Orthodox would come to worship in large numbers.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The church, the "Kashtzal", stands at the northwestern side of the town, near the outskirts and the river. The building was completed after World War I. Before then, the Catholics used to worship in a small wooden church. After service, the Catholics used to "invade" the shops and the market and give the Jews handsome profits.

THE ICE HOUSE

To the east of the square, in a large cellar of "Kabak" house, was the icehouse of the town. The congregation had leased the place from **Itzhak der Kabaker**, whose name was **WARHAFTIG**. In winter, they used to bring by cart, hundreds of tons of ice, cut from the river during March-April. This work was voluntary; and there was a fixed quota on ice that each had to bring from Zelbianka River to the icehouse. The store of ice was important during summer and its distribution strictly supervised by the community. The ice was needed especially for the sick. Every patient was allocated a ration of ice needed to bring down his temperature. There were often diseases in the township. Especially serious the situation in 1915, after the battles in and around the town, which ended with the German occupation. The number of casualties was so great that a typhus epidemic erupted before all the bodies could be buried. Before the typhus epidemic, there was an outbreak of cholera but these patients died within hours and did not need the ice. The typhus cases, on the other hand, suffered for days from high temperatures; and the ice applied to their foreheads was the only remedy available. There were patients in practically every home; and the lines in front of the icehouse were very long. The ice also permitted to preserve certain foodstuffs during the summer, but this was considered of secondary importance.

THE ZELBIANKA RIVER

The waters of Zelbianka flowed at a terrific speed near the houses behind the Orthodox Church, up to Perkop bridge. Following the agrarian reform of 1860 in Russia, the peasants received parcels of land. Thanks to the river water, they achieved excellent crops.

THE OLD CHRISTIAN CEMETERY

Located near the new Catholic Church. In the middle of the 19th century, a new cemetery was laid out for the Orthodox and the Catholics in the Zaretz sector, on the road to Zelbian.

T H E Z A R E T Z S E C T O R

It is assumed that this sector was built in the 18th or 19th century. It was the newest part of the town and developed after the canal was dug. In 1920, there were 370 Jews and 250 Gentiles in this sector, together 620 souls. The Gentiles concentrated mainly in the approaches to Piesk, to the east, in Tori village, and to the West in the Lestzina farms.

TOPOGRAPHY

This sector, on high ground near Napoleon Hill, lies higher than the two other sectors. Moreover, while the Schulhoif and Perkop sectors have only one exit to the north -- Mosti, Shtuchin, Lida, Vilna, the Zaretz sector has exits in three directions:

Eastward in the direction of Zelwa, Slonim, Minsk

Westward in the direction of Luna, Skidel, Grodno

Southward in the direction of Volkovysk, Bialystok, Warsaw

This sector is almost entirely built on the canal. The inhabitants were part Jews, part Gentile peasants. The canal provided irrigation; and every house had a large orchard.

GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

All the government institutions were in the Police Station and the Christian School. Therefore, the place was always bustling with people. Litigation took place mainly during the long winter months when the peasants were not busy on their farms. The

great concentration of people made business flourish. The farmers brought their wheat for sale and purchased in the shops the products they needed.

STATE SCHOOL

In the eastern part of this sector was the Christian State School attended by the Christian pupils of the town and the neighboring villages. The school stands on the bank of the canal and overlooks the entire sector. It is surrounded by a large garden tended by the children. Near the school is a fine drive of tall trees planted some 100-150 years ago. Their boughs were of enormous width. These were trees of exceptional beauty; and it was said of them that they were the silent witnesses to all the romances of the youngsters. Classes took place mainly in winter, as in the summer months the children had to help with parents on the farms. The village children were not busy on their farms. The Christian children were a source of income for the shopkeepers, as they always had a few loose kopers in their pockets. But, they used to terrorize the Jewish children who kept out of the way.

FLOUR MILLS

The two flourmills were located in Zaretz. They are built near the bridge over the canal and operated by waterwheels. As already explained, the need for the mills prompted the building of the canal. The mills were large and well equipped.

SHOPS

The shopping center was in Perkop while there were only 6 shops in Zaretz. Their patrons were the people coming to the Law Courts, the police station and the flourmills. The shops did good business. Particularly successful was **SARA HINDA**, a young widow who, before World War I, had to provide for her four daughters. As she knew how to deal with her customers, she acquired a great many and made a good living. One of her daughters, **Yaffa KAPLAN**, lives in Israel.

STROVNITZ FOREST

Some 500 meters from Zaretz, there is a dense forest. It was a real pleasure to walk among the 150-200 year old trees. The forest belonged to the landowner VAISFINK of the STROVNITZI estate. In Piesk, it was said that this was the most beautiful forest in the entire region. The owner, a kind-hearted man, allowed the townspeople to walk in

the forest. Every Saturday before sundown, the people of Piesk would stroll through the forest, enjoying the pure air and the scenery.

In 1905, the forest was used as a meeting place by the young members of the "Briders un Schwester" revolutionary organization in the Piesk area. After the failure of the uprising, the members went into hiding in the forest; and their parents brought them food and clothing. As already mentioned, a Cossack regiment was sent to comb the forest; and the conspirators were discovered. But the decree forbidding Jews to walk in the forest remained in force for a long time afterward.

NEW CHRISTIAN CEMETERY

Near Piesk, on the Zelbian road, is the new cemetery of the Catholic and Orthodox Christians. From the inscriptions on the tombstones, it is evident that the first graves were dug in the 19th century. Before then, the Christians used to bury their dead in the Perkop sector, near the Catholic Church, at the other end of town.

PERSONALITIES, INSTITUTIONS, CEREMONIES

Rabbi Asher KWIAT and Rabbi Shimon BENJAMIN

These two rabbis constituted the Rabbinical Court in the township, the supreme authority. At times, litigation would take place before one of the Rabbis and at times before both. The verdict was accepted without reservation, as the community relied on the honesty and justice of their Rabbis. Therefore, matters of matrimony, family and inheritance were submitted to them. There were even people who never applied to the Law Court for matters of finance, partnership, etc, preferring the two Rabbis. Thus, as the Rabbis were prominent personalities, great scholars and always willing to listen--the social unity of the Jewish community was preserved.

THE CONGREGATION

The Congregation established and supervised the following institutions: synagogues, Chevra Kadisha, Talmud Torah, the Hekdesh, the bathhouse, Kupat Gemilut Hassadim provident fund, the ice house, the cemetery, etc.

Work was mainly carried out voluntarily by the leading citizens. Income derived from indirect taxes on slaughtering and the sale of meat and drinks. Another source of income was donations from well-situated merchants. But, the middle class too, as well as the working class, contributed their part. Among the most important donors were

Reb KOPPEL, **Reb Israel SHEVACH**, and others. All gave handsomely for they knew that the money went for the social, sanitary, and cultural services. The government did not allocate any money whatsoever for these purposes. The pupils, too, were called upon to help raise funds for the Talmud Torah. Every Friday noon, the 13 and 14 year-olds, armed with notebooks and money boxes, would make their rounds according to lists. The wives of the wealthy would give generously and heap blessings on the heads of the youngsters. Mrs. **Malka WEINSTEIN** usually filled one quarter of a box. Thanks to these donations, the children of the town were able to learn. The collectors would go out in pairs, each in charge of a street or sector. This would go on from 12 noon to just before sundown. On Sunday morning, the notebooks and money books would be handed over to **Rabbi Mordechai AMIEL**, who remitted them to the head Gabbai, **Reb JOSEF LEIB**. Great was the joy when the boxes were full, the Rabbi would smile and say: "Well, children, you have done a good job."

WEDDINGS IN PIESK

These ceremonies took place near the well on the Schul Square. The entire community would participate, in all weathers. Before the Chuppah, a dance group composed of the township's women of all ages would perform. But what interested the children most was the appearance of the bridegroom. It became quite an event when there was snow, as the children rehearsed for days beforehand. A great many snowballs were pelted with great precision on the bridegroom and his suite. The townspeople would stream to the square, dressed in their festive attire, holding lighted candles. All the faces radiated joy and pleasure; and the good wishes for the young couple came out of the heart.

DAYS OF MOURNING IN PIESK

There was never need to publish obituaries. When someone passed away, the news spread like wildfire; and a wave of sadness swept over the community. The entire township participated in the grief of the bereaved family and offered help and solace. Almost the entire community would follow the funeral cortege to the Schulhoif Square. They would stop outside the synagogue where the deceased used to worship; and the Rabbi delivered the eulogy. The Schul square, so often the seen of happiness and celebration, would suddenly become a place of mourning. At times, even the sun would hide behind the clouds.

THE SCHULHOIF--SPIRITUAL CENTER

The square was so important in the life of the community that even the Germans became aware of it. Every action to be carried out was decreed there. The inhabitants

soon realized that the German decrees spelled no good; but they still gathered there. The Schulhoif Square, the very heart of the township, was totally destroyed; and those of its inhabitants who could not escape, were killed.

MERCHANTS AND SHOPKEEPERS IN PIESK

The township counted some 75 merchants and shopkeepers, representing 48% of the breadwinners. They did well, despite the hostile attitude of the authorities. In fact, they had to be successful, as they were forbidden to engage in other activities. Even the artisans did some business during the off-season. At the fair, one could see them among the wheat merchants, buying and selling.

WOOD MERCHANTS

The wood merchants bought trees from the landowners of Piesk and surroundings. Expert woodcutters who hailed mostly from Piesk felled these trees. The laborers were Gentiles from the neighboring villages or from other countries. The trees were then sorted and processed. Trees served for building homes, railroad sleepers, telephone poles, rafters, kindling, etc. From the forests, the trees were transported by cart. Some were loaded on trains, but most were carried to Zelbianka River and from there floated in a westerly direction as far as the Neman. There, the trees were assembled into rafts and carried all the way to the big towns. This mode of transportation was much cheaper and much in use in Byelorussia and Lithuania, especially so since the railway network was not sufficiently developed in those days. The wood business required many personnel. The merchants employed experts, laborers, clerks and watermen. Scores of Piesk people were watermen. The most expert served as skippers while younger boys helped him. Many people who did not directly engage in this trade were associated with it such as some artisans who also found their livelihood in the wood business.

FLOUR MILLS

As already mentioned, there were two flourmills in Piesk, both driven by water. The smaller of the two ground flour from rye, wheat, oats, and other cereals and satisfied the requirements of the town and the neighboring farmsteads. At times, the queue was so long that the customers had to wait for one or two weeks. They used this time do their shopping in town, which of course benefited the shops. The flour produced by the other mill went mainly for export and was of a very high quality. It appears that the flourmills were extremely well equipped, as the demand for Piesk flour was great while flourmills in the neighboring localities always had large stocks available. Often enough, the Piesk merchants that ordered from the other mills as the local ones could not supply the required quantity. The mills employed many agents and workers, but mainly carters. These could transport the grain from the villages to the mills and the flour from the mills

to the railway station, which was 1 km distant from the town, from where the flour was transported to the big centers. Before World War I, the mills belonged to **Israel SHEBACH**. Later, they came into the possession of his sons: **Abraham, Eliezer**, and **Moshe-Mendel**. They eventually passed into other hands. **Yekutiel SHEBACH**, one of the sons of the late **Abraham**, lives in Israel. Two other sons live in Argentina, of whom **Ozer SHEBACH** and his wife usually spend six months a year in Israel with their married daughter who lives in Haifa.

GRAIN MERCHANTS

Several families in Piesk traded in grain. The most successful among them was the **DACHOWSKI** family, who had been in the business for generations. Their wholesale-store supplied grain to retailers in the town and surroundings. The late **Avigdor DACHOWSKI** left Piesk at the time and settled in Israel. So did the late **Yocheved AMIEL**, one of the daughters of the family. The sons of the late **Yocheved** and **Shlomo AMIEL** are **Prof. Saadia** and **Dr. Yacob**, prominent chemists in Israel. The grain merchants bought the crops directly from the farmers or through agents and stored them in warehouses in Mosti on the Neman. In early spring, with the melting of the snow, the grain would be loaded on barges and sailed down the river to Grodno and Kaunas and as far as Memel in Lithuania and from there to East Germany.

CATTLE MERCHANTS

Cattle [trade] was one of the major businesses in town. The dealers would buy and sell cattle at the fair, on the market or from the farmers in the neighborhood. Some merchants bought cattle cheap in winter from farmers who had run out of fodder. In spring, they would put them out with farmers who had grazing grounds. After a few months, the good animals were sold as milk cows while the others were sold for slaughter.

HIDE MERCHANTS

These merchants bought skins from farmers and from hunters. After the hides dried, they were sold to wholesalers in the big towns. This profession required great expertise; and the merchants in town indeed specialized in this line.

ORCHARD TENANTS

These were people in Piesk who, in blossom time, leased orchards of 100-150 dunam from the landowners. The lease was by tender. The landowners did not undertake to let the orchards to the lowest bidder but rather to those who were known for the expert care of the trees. **Baruch BOROWSKI** was one of the outstanding experts in this field; and

the landowners preferred him to many others. It was said that he understood fruit trees better than most agronomists. The orchards were let in May-June. The fruit was picked at the end of September or the middle of October and was stored in cellars so that it was not harmed by frost in winter. Handling fruit was no simple matter. The trees had to be supported, the ground weeded, the orchard guarded against thieves and finally the fruit had to be picked without damaging the boughs. With proper care, the tenants made satisfactory profits.

TOBACCO MERCHANTS

The soil around the town was suitable for tobacco growing. The merchants would buy the crop and store it in warehouses. Afterwards, they sold it to factories in Volkovysk, the district capital, and in particular to the "**Shereshevski**" plant that was seized by the Polish government and subsequently tobacco trading declined in the town. As a rule, profits from the business were reasonable, as it did not require substantial investments. The crops were bought on credit from the _____; and there was hardly any waste.

BUTCHERS

The butchers bought animals on the hoof from cattle merchants or from the farmers. The slaughterers were townspeople. Kosher meat was sold to the Jews of Piesk and the neighboring townships while the non-kosher meat went to the Gentiles of Piesk and the villages. Before World War I, the butchers supplied meat to the Russian army, afterwards, the Polish army, albeit in smaller quantities. The butchers were well off as meat yielded good profits. Butchers had to be courageous, as they were required to travel a lot on the roads, which made them vulnerable to robbers. It was therefore only natural that the butchers, their knives drawn, were always in the forefront of the defenders at times of pogroms. They were devoted Jews, observant and valiant.

SHOPKEEPERS

There were three wholesale stores in Piesk. In one of them, almost every article was obtainable, except clothes and materials. This store, supplying all the retailers in the town and the district, as well as the landowners, belonged to **Strika SHAPIRA**, who managed the business all by herself while her husband, **Reb Yacov SHAPIRA**, studied the Scriptures at the Bet Midrash. Two of **Strika SHAPIRA's** granddaughters live in Israel. The second store, owned by the **YOGEL** family, supplied materials and clothes. Several prominent Rabbis were descended from this family, among them the late **Rabbi YOGEL**, head of the Slonim Yeshiva and later head of the Ramat Gan Yeshiva; and **Rabbi Yehoshua YOGEL**,

principal of the religious "Noam" seminar in Pardes Hanna. It was **Esther YOGEL** who carried the full burden of the business while her husband **Mordechai Getzel** was studying at the Bet Midrash. One of their children, a student at the Hebron Yeshiva was

killed during the 1929 riots. The third store, owned by the **DACHOWSKI** family, supplied grains. There were the large stores in town, selling wholesale. In addition, there were some 25 retail shops in Piesk. Groceries, cloth, haberdashery, toys, copper and iron ware, a chemist's, etc. The shopkeepers worked very hard from early in the morning until late at night, in the cold of winter and the heat of summer. As a rule, the women carried the burden of providing for the family even though they had to take care of the children and look after the household. Most of the men spent their time at the Bet Hamidrash, studying the Scriptures, thus assuring their families a share in the hereafter.

The shops were financially weak. The townspeople never had much money and bough on credit while the shops needed cash to purchase their supplies. There were no banks in the town; and the Gemilut Hassadim Fund gave only small loans. So, the shopkeepers had to borrow, often from widows who had been saving penny by penny in order to raise a dowry for a daughter. It did happen that a girl had found herself a fiancé but the shopkeeper was unable to return the loan.

The results, very often, were rather tragic.

THE FAIR

Every month, on the 25th, the fair was held in Piesk, attended by thousands of peasants who arrived by cart or on foot. Some arrived one or two days early in order to investigate conditions. Others came before dawn so as to occupy a good spot on the square which held the whole crowd, their carts, horses, cows, sheep, pigs, and geese. From the well in the center of the square, water was drawn for humans and animals. The whole town prepared itself for the fair: the shopkeepers, the drink vendors, merchants, artisans, tailors, cobblers, seamstresses, peddlers, brokers. For this one day could provide a living for at least part of the month. Pickpockets, too, waited for this day. Three to four days before the fair, the horse dealers would stage races on the plain along the river in order to train their animals. These races, held mostly by Gypsies, always drew large crowds, especially children. Before the fair, the town looked festive. After the fair, it looked as if there had been riots.

MARKET DAY

Held weekly on Sundays: It yielded smaller profits than the fair as it was of a smaller scope. Even so, hundreds of people assembled on market day in order to offer their goods, especially the neighboring villagers. Some of them would attend services in churches before starting business.

KABAK HOUSE

In the center of town, near the fair and market place, stood a large house called Kabak. It served as a hostel; and its adjoining stables could hold 20 carts and horses. On fair and market days, the Kabak, owned by **Itzhak WARHAFTIG**, was always full. But, it

also served regular travelers. After World War I, the "Vilner Truppe" traveled from town to town, staging their plays. When visiting Piesk, the Kabak was turned into a theater.

RECAPITULATION

There were 3 hide merchants in Piesk, 4 wood merchants, 1 flourmill owner, 10 grain merchants, 5 cattle dealers. In total: 23. 6 tenants of orchards, 6 tobacco merchants, 6 butchers. In total: 18.

ARTISANS AND FREE PROFESSIONS

There were a hundred artisans in Piesk. They constituted about 50% of the breadwinners, and played an important role in the economic, cultural and all other walks of life. From their ranks came the socialist groups, as well as the fist pioneers for Israel.

SEAMSTRESSES

They sewed dresses for the women of the town and the district as well as men's underclothes. They worked at home and excelled in their craftsmanship. Girls whose pay was next to nothing but [who] learned a trade in this manner assisted them. The girls, many of them beautiful, worked very hard, sitting at the table and signing romantic songs. Although work went on for 12-14 hours a day, without any trade-union supervision, production was very high.

STITCHERS

Supplied their products to the townspeople and the neighboring villagers. They earned a good living as the trade required expertise and did not allow much competition. They too worked long hours but made better money than the other artisans.

HATTERS

The hatters produced hats of all kinds in their well-appointed workshops. There was always a large stock, which permitted the farmers to buy hats for the whole family on fair and market days.

One of the hatters was an exceptional personality. First of all, he was some 2 meters tall. Secondly, he used to pray for the well being of the Gentiles. When asked to explain himself, he would say: "If they'll be in good health and well situated, they will buy many hats!" Beside fair and market days, the eve of Festivals were also good for business.

As a rule, the head of the family would call with all his children to buy hats. It is hard to describe the joy of the children when they were allowed to choose their hats by themselves.

BAKERS

Five large bakeries, only four of which are mentioned here, supplied the town with bread, rolls, and all kinds of cakes. Most of the bakeries were managed by women and employed many workers of both sexes.

One bakery belonged to **RUTKE di BEKERKE** and stood next to the bridge over the river. Most of her daughters worked with her. This bakery was famous in the town, especially for its rolls particularly liked by the children. When a woman wanted her grandchild to obey, it was sufficient to promise a roll from Rutke's. Another bakery was owned by **ZISHKE di BEKERKE** and stood next to the wooden Bet Midrash. This bakery was larger than the first one, better introduced, and employed many workers. It also catered for fairs held in outlying towns. The third bakery belonged to **Chaya SCHWIDBURSKE** and specialized in rolls and long, tasty loaves. It was to this bakery that the Sabbath "Cholent" was traditionally brought on Fridays. The two daughters of **Chaya SCHWIDBURSKE, Hanna and Deborah**, live with their families in Israel. The fourth bakery, owned by Mrs. **PILKOWITZ**, produced "Ratznikim" whose special taste was famous all over town and particularly well-liked by the children. **Miriam**, the daughter of Mrs. **PILKOWITZ**, has settled in Israel with her family.

MATZA BAKING

Immediately after Purim, most of the bakeries, and a number of additional houses, were emptied in preparation for matza baking. First of all, the ovens were made "kosher", following which, for four solid weeks all the women and girls of the town were mobilized and kept working day and night. The sight of these women and girls was quite impressive. They donned white kerchiefs, their festive dresses and white aprons. Boys, too, would help. They prepared the kosher flour, carried water, and tendered the dough to the baker standing in front of the oven. The matzot were of a high quality.

COBBLERS

There were two categories of cobblers in Piesk. One comprised those who were no experts and mostly repaired shoes or cut soles. Although they tried to reach the farmers too, they hardly made a living. On the other hand, there were expert shoemakers who made shoes and boots to measure. Their workshops were well-equipped and their production of a high standard.

BLACKSMITHS

There were two blacksmiths in town who plied their trade with the help of their sons, in particular for the farms in the district. They worked from early morning until midnight, but made a good living. One, **Joel BALITZKI**, worked very hard six days a week and spent most of the Sabbath in synagogue, festively dressed. He was a deeply religious man, happy with his lot, a kindly smile forever lighting his face. His entire family immigrated to Argentina. The other, **Reb ZELIG**, very much resembled Reb Joel. His four sons worked with him; and they earned well. On Sabbath, he would sit in the synagogue, wearing his "kapote", and chanted the melodies surrounded by his sons.

WHEELWRIGHT

Reb NISUL was the only one to make wooden wheels for the carts of the town and the district. He was nicknamed "**Nissel der Stelmach.**" His finished wheels he sent to the blacksmith to have the iron hoops mounted.

GLAZIER

Reb Abraham Moshe "der Glezer" was the only one of his trade in the town. He used to travel from village to village and carry out repairs. In the autumn, he would go from house to house in town and see that the windows were in good condition. In winter, he was very busy, fitting double windows and filling them with straw as a protection against the frost.

TINSMITHS

Reb Moishe "der Blecher" and his three sons plied their trade in the town, the village, and the estates. During fair time, young Gentiles who were about to join the army very often ran wild in town, terrorizing the Jews whom they considered cowards. But, after **Reb Moishe "der Blecher's** three sons **Leibe, Yudel, and Mendel** grew up, things changed. These boys were exceptionally strong and daring. They had a very simple method. They would beat up the ruffians and burn down their houses. And soon enough, there was not one Goy left who dared disturb the order.

TAILORS

There were some 10 tailors in Piesk, some of them very high class, others second-rate. The high class tailors had workshops and modern sewing machines, employing about a dozen workmen and apprentices. They made modern suits to measure, and summer and winter coats. **Mordechai BOROVSKI**, who lived in Vilna, used to come and stay with his parents from time to time. On these occasions he would order a few suits and overcoats. When asked in Vilna where he had made his nice clothes, he would answer "In Posen" to which people remarked that it was obvious that this was good craftsmanship, not like in Vilna. The tailors were patronized not only by the townspeople but also by the landowners. At times, the latter paid with wheat instead of money. **Feive Shraga TZIN**, whom we have already mentioned as the communal leader who had set up "Teferet Bachurim", the spiritual and cultural center for the youth, was famous even before World War I as the owner of an up-to-date workshop, well equipped, employing 15 men and apprentices. He formed a whole generation of master-tailors, two of whom deserve to be mentioned: **Leib FINKELSTEIN** who later on settled in Bialystok where he became very well known and **Shmul BOROVSKI**, who opened his own business and employed 10 people. Another high-class tailor was **Reb AARON**. He worked with his two sons and 10 people. As an expert, he did not fall below **Feive Shraga TZIN**. After World War I, **Yehuda BABITZ** came to Piesk from Roznoi (Rhuzany?). He married a local girl and stayed for a number of years as a tailor. Eventually, he emigrated to Argentina with his family and is still active in his trade. The second-class tailors worked mostly for the Gentiles, traveling from village to village. At times, they would stop at a village for several months. They were mainly occupied in winter, as during the summer the farmers were busy on the fields.

CARTERS

There were only 6 professional craters in Piesk but, for a certain period following World War I, most of the people in town had a horse and cart. Thus, the young men of Piesk, tall, healthy, strong and handsome, used to transport various cargos. Grain came from the villages and the warehouses to the flour mills. Flour went to the villages and the big towns and tobacco, a crop of hundreds of tons a year, to Volkovysk, a distance of 22 km, and to Grodno, a distance of 80 km, as the tobacco factories were in these two towns. There were only 6 professional carters in Piesk and for two reasons: the journey to Volkovsyk and Grodno took two days; and so did, of course, the return trip. In those days, the youngsters were enjoying life, singing Israeli songs, especially "How beautiful are the Nights in Canaan", which they preferred above all others. Upon reaching destination, they would stay an extra day so that they might visit the movie houses and look at the marvels of the city. On their return journey, they would bring goods for the merchants and shopkeepers. In this manner, the long journeys became profitable. In addition to grain, flour, and tobacco, they also transported felled trees to Zelbianka River or to the towns of Mosti and Zelbian. Without modern equipment, the youngsters soon learned how to load the tall, heavy trunks on their carts. But, they also learned two basic principals: firstly, always see to it that there is a load in both directions, i.e., never set out fully loaded, and return empty. This was never profitable. In one direction, the load must be a full one and on the return trip, at least half a load was required. Secondly, order and discipline at work.

Indeed, the men who laid the foundations of the transport cooperatives in Israel acquired the principles of the trade in the Diaspora, transporting grain, flour, tobacco and trees.

RAFTERS ("WASSER MENSCHEN")

Some 30 families in town were engaged in rafting trees for seven months a year. In summer, there were even more. The rafters worked for Jewish contractors and wood merchants. Their work -- which at times required them to remain for months on the water, far from home-- molded them into a devoted and closely-knit family. As a rule, fathers taught their sons the trade; single trees were floated down Zelbianka River as far as the Neman. At the point where the Zelbianka joins the Neman, a blockage would be set up. There, the trunks were joined into rafts that were taken down the Neman to the towns of Byelorussia and Lithuania and from there to Memel. It was imperative to use the waterway, as in those days the network of railroads was insufficiently developed. The rafters were wonderful boatmen who had specialized in their work for years. They would sail barges down the Neman, which is 1000 kilometers long and 500 kilometers wide and has a powerful current. The journey on the Neman, as far as the port of Memel, would take months, but the bearded boatmen, assisted by their sons, were strong and healthy and well trained. It goes without saying that the boatmen encountered many adventures. They would meet wild animals coming to quench their thirst on the riverbanks or watch handsome young women doing their laundry in the river. Back home, they would spin their tales for the benefit of children and grandchildren. On Sabbath, during interval at the synagogue, the townspeople, travelers, and in particular the children, were fascinated by their stories. Among the Piesk and Mosti rivermen, there were some outstanding cantors who served in this capacity in the synagogue. During the High Festivals, they would officiate in the big towns where they were well paid. **Yehuda ROZANSKI**, a broad-shouldered giant, though still young, excelled in his work. The old-timers said of him that he had all the prospects of becoming a river captain. It was a rare pleasure to watch him standing on a single tree trunk, floating down the river towards the Neman. In the year 1926, several youngsters from Piesk founded the "Kvutzat Zifzif" in Acre. At the time, there was also a group of fisherman in Acre, hailing from Russia. When **Yehuda ROZANSKI** and **David REITBORD** arrived in Israel, the "Kvutzat Zifzif" sent them to the fishermen who asked ironically "but have they ever seen water?" The answer was "Just try them." One night, the fishermen sailed from Acre in heavy seas and reached a spot near what is now Kiryat Haim. For some reason, a quarrel broke out between the fishermen and their skipper. The latter left the boat and returned to Acre on foot. The fishermen were at a loss as to what to do. How would they return on the stormy sea? **Yehuda ROZANSKI** reassured them. He took the helm, put **David REITBORD** and one of the fishermen at the oars, and brought the boat safely back to Acre. The fishermen admitted that Yehuda was even better than their skipper was. From that day onwards, their attitude toward the newcomers changed entirely. The two friends even helped "Kvutzat Zifzif" who were in financial straits. One night, the fishermen hauled in a catch worth hundreds of pounds.

Seasoned Arab fishermen said that this was something that happened only once in seventy years.

Yehuda and **David's** share was some 10 pounds which was more than the Kvutza managed to earn in a whole month. Needless to say, they shared the money with their fellow townsmen.

AGRICULTURE

The Jews of Piesk did not have enough land of their own. Therefore, they leased land from the Gentiles. The Jews used to fertilize the land with cow's dung and sow potatoes, which yielded sufficiently for half a year's needs. The owner used the well-fertilized field for sowing wheat or corn. This arrangement suited both parties: the Jews because they possess no land of their own and the Gentiles because their land was well tended. There were also Jews who leased land from the estate owners and sowed wheat, rye, etc. The arrangement was as follows: 2/3 of the harvest for the owner and 1/3 for the tenant. Mainly those Jews who had good relations with the landowners could do this. Hard work was required; and sometimes, natural causes harmed the crops. But those who were experts made a good living. In return for the lease of the land, the Jewish farmers used to lend the estate owner money without interest.

TOBACCO GROWING

This was just one of the agricultural branches but because of its importance for Piesk; and because it ranks among the delicate cultures, it deserves special mention. The tobacco growers also leased land from the Gentile owners but it had to be soil of a particular type. Tobacco growing demanded great skill but no special efforts. The whole family engaged in it, including the children from the age of 8. The children also participated in the harvest, picking the leaves, drying them, and packing the bales for shipping. During the high season, most of the townspeople helped. This enabled them to buy their clothes and even to save dowries for their daughters.

ARTISANS--RECAPITULATION

5 seamstresses, 3 stitchers, 3 hatters, 5 bakers, 6 cobblers, 3 blacksmiths, 1 wheelwright, 1 glazier, 4 tinsmiths, 8 tailors, 2 bookbinders, 3 bricklayers, 6 builders, 6 carters, 1 tar maker, 30 rafters, 10 farmers, 1 water drawer, 3 sextons, 1 lawyer, 1 pharmacist, 2 tombstone cutters, In total, about 100 people. We mention some artisans or professionals in Piesk who are not described in these memoirs. But they, too, not less than the others, worked very hard and showed much devotion, honesty and faith.

Piesk: the eve of World War I

At the beginning of July, 1914, rumors arrived from the larger cities that war was inevitable. The Jews gathered in their synagogues on the Schulhoif and offered their prayers and supplications to the Almighty. One Friday, posters were put up, announcing in huge letters: MOBILIZATION. Saturday night, all the Jews of Piesk assembled in the Schulhoif and intoned the Tisha B'Av lamentations. Sunday morning, the conscripts who left for Volkovysk, the district capital, were seen off by their wives, children and parents whose bitter cries rose to heaven. It was a sunny day but the great sadness descended on the community. A few days later, a demonstration of sympathy was held for the Father, Czar Nicholas II by Yudel "der Blecher" before a cheering crowd. At the end of the month of Elul, the parents of the conscripts assembled in the cemetery and prostrated on the tombs of the ancestors, praying for the safety of their sons on the front. Piesk eagerly followed the news about the war, although it was received with great delay. All talk related to the war and the possible outcome. Although the situation did not look encouraging, the people believed that Russia would win. So, the summer went by and winter approached. The children were told that no fighting took place in winter which somewhat comforted them. On September 8, news was received of a great number of casualties at the front and of events in Grodno.

Around this town, the farmers of the area had built large underground fortifications. For this purpose, many were ordered to report with their carriages and horses and to provide food and fodder for a fortnight. Among those engaged in these fortifications was **Chaim "der Strubnitzer"**, a farmer from Strubnitze a village near Piesk. As he had still not returned home after one month, all kinds of stories were told about him: the German had taken him prisoner, he had been abducted, he had lost his way, and so on. The man eventually returned home; and for years afterwards, he used to tell of his adventures while building the fortifications. Meanwhile, news was received that two of the town's sons had fallen.

One was the son of the local cantor, **MERIMINSKI**. The bereaved father received the terrible news stoically. The other was the son of **Reb Aaron Yakov**. The father broke entirely down, went berserk in the synagogues, asking why his son had been killed while all the others remained alive. Thus, he would behave for years afterwards, showing his embittered hatred. In the summer of 1915, Grodno was emptied of its Jewish inhabitants. The authorities encouraged the rumors that the Jews were communicating information to the Germans. Many arrests were made; and the entire population in the fighting zone was resettled far from the front line. Many Grodno families arrived in Piesk and were billeted with the local population. This increased the panic, although business flourished. Products such as sugar, salt, petrol, shoes, and boots were hoarded; and prices soared. Small coins disappeared from circulation, as rumors had it that paper money was becoming worthless. The townspeople, and in particular the peasants, hid the coins; and it became a problem to receive change. Eventually, the authorities intervened, as did the army. Arrests were made; and there were riots in the town. In August 1915, rumors had it that the Germans were going to be stopped at the Neman. Fortifications and trenches were built around Piesk and

neighboring localities. At that moment, the rearguard of the retreating army arrived in Piesk. A regiment of Cossacks looted the shops. The frightened Jews petitioned the "Pristof", the town major, to stop the rioting Cossacks but to no avail. All the Jews could do was to hide in cellars and other hiding places. The main concern was for the girls after whom the Cossacks searched. The rioters, who had heard the slanderous incitements to the effect that the Jews were spying for the Germans, caused much damage and harm to life and property. Thus, by September 6, all the Jewish houses were empty of their occupants who had all gone into hiding in cellars and dugouts.

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

In September 1915, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, after two long days of battle and bombardment, the people of Piesk left their hideouts on the banks of the Zelbianka. The Jewish soldiers of the township who had stayed at base and had not accompanied the retreating Russian army had prepared these dugouts. Among these soldiers was an expert in excavations, **Niumi BINKOWITZ**, who today lives in Argentina. A delegation of two, **Reb Leibe Ben** and **Mendel BOROVSki**, went out to meet the Germans, carrying bread and salt. The first Germans to reach the town were not too polite and demanded more bread and salt. Later, an officer arrived with some soldiers who rebuked the advance party for their behavior. He reassured the frightened inhabitants and told them that the conquering German army would treat the Jews kindly. He even pointed at some of his escort, saying that they, too, were Jews. These soldiers smiled but did not speak a word. Finally, the officer asked for water to fill the canteens and went on, in pursuit of the Russian army. As a matter of fact, only a few meters separated the trees, he had not noticed it. The Russian still managed to blow up some of the bridges and to set fire to one of the flourmills. The German engineering corps threw up a temporary bridge on which they crossed to the other side of the river. That night, hand-to-hand fighting took place east of the town and in Tori village. The Russians won; and the Germans lost hundreds of dead in the Battle of Piesk. The next day, the Germans withdrew to the south, to the dense forests. The Jews fled with them, fearing the Russians' revenge. During this retreat, German soldiers and local civilians had to cross an open clearing where they were exposed to Russian fire. And, indeed, many soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded there. The Germans extended first aid to the civilians too.

One young German soldier behaved in an exceptional manner. He noticed a group of townspeople seeking to hide in the forest but running the wrong way. He stopped them, showed them a map, and said, "Jews, you must come this way."

As if this was not enough, he walked in front of the group. Suddenly, an enemy bullet hit him, killing him on the spot. Two German soldiers who had witnessed the incident said that his name was HEINZ. He was buried at the spot where he had been killed, at the edge of the forest; and the Jews used to visit the grave from time to time. At the beginning of the summer, his parents came from Germany, had the body exhumed and

took it with them. Some Jews told the parents how their son had been killed and how they used to visit the grave. Heinz' father took a photograph of them and left. The Jews who had fled from Piesk on Rosh Hashanah hid in Mashievitz forest, some 10 km. distant until after Yom Kippur.

They returned with a special permission from the army, issued after the Germans had crossed the Neman at Mosti. The returning Jews found a destroyed township. Some of the houses and one of the flourmills had completely burned down; some of the houses had neither doors nor windows; and others were no more than bare skeletons. The population remained without a roof over their heads, without clothing. Everything had to be started again from the beginning. The German occupation lasted three years and four months. It was a period of suffering, hunger and disease. Cholera and typhus epidemics broke out. This was not at the beginning. On the contrary, the Jews felt relieved. They were no longer exposed to the cruelty of the Russian army or the Cossacks or the brutality of the Russian authorities. Initially, the German's behavior justified the feeling of relief and encouraged the Jews to repair the material damage and restore normal life. But disappointment came soon enough with the occupier showing his true face. To all appearances, the local administration was in civilian hands. A committee was elected composed of **Baruch GERD** and his son **David GERD**, **Baruch BOROVSKI**, **Yeshayahu MENDELEWITZ BASHITZKI**, **Joseph David FOKSMAN**, and others. **Mendel Joseph SHEVACH** was elected "Burgermeister". A local militia was set up, comprising both Jews and Christians. But it soon became obvious that the local authority served the Germans as a means to opposing sides but because of the darkness and attained their aims. [sic] So, for example, was the "Burgermeister" compelled to confiscate grain, belongings and furniture and to conscript people for forced labor. Within a short time, the stock of merchandise and grain disappeared. The people hid what remained of the wheat underneath their wooden floorboards. Once the stocks were exhausted, the entire economic activity of the town came to a standstill. On the other hand, prices soared and profiteering thrived. Wheat, flour and salt, in particular, were smuggled in, as the shortage of foodstuffs became more and more acute. A curfew was imposed from eight in the evening until six in the morning. No one was permitted to leave town without a pass. The occupier was ruthless, beating and arresting people, insulting and humiliating them. A deep depression descended on the town; and all activities -- economic, social, and cultural -- came to a complete standstill.

HUNGER

When hunger started reigning in the town, the people would go out to the villages in quest of food. Prices were never discussed. Those who found corn or wheat were overhappy. But things were different when caught with foodstuff. Not only was the food confiscated but also the owner would be tortured until he gave away his supplier. The latter could expect the total destruction of his farm while, often enough, the customer was sentenced to prison in addition to the torture he had been submitted to. Eventually, the Gentiles became too frightened and stopped selling to the Jews. It happened that

one of the farmers in a nearby village was in need of money and took the courage to sell wheat at an inflated price of **Meir BOROVSKI**. It is probably that somebody informed on him. The army ambushed the farmer on his way to Zaskaski forest and arrested him. They confiscated his wheat and demanded that he reveal the name of his client. When he refused, they tied him to the horse's tail and dragged him along until he broke down and spoke. The army and the militia then went to the **BOROVSKI** home and started a thorough search. Floorboards were torn up; and after digging underneath, they found a hundred cwt. of wheat hidden three meters deep. The wheat was confiscated; and the whole family was beaten up. Eventually, the authorities decided to allocate bread by ration cards. But this was no solution. The ration was so small that it could not possibly alleviate the shortage. The more acute hunger became, the more profiteering flourished. Rumors had it that some of the Committee members were involved, i.e., that they diverted part of the allocation and sold it. There might be some truth in this allegation as some of the Committee members became very rich at that time.

SLAVE LABOR

One day, a decree was published, directing all men between 18 and 50 to register with the Kommandant. At the same time, it became known that they would all have to work one day a week. At times, it was two days. The Jews were put to work in the Kommandant's year and the soldier's billets but mostly on the wooden road that was built between Piesk and the village of Assilan, a distance of 7 km. The plan was to connect this road, later on, with the town of Dretzen [Derechin] in the direct of Baranowitz, near the front line. Some 500 Jews and Gentiles, from Piesk and surroundings, [English page 36] worked on this road. Paid workers from other towns in the occupied areas also were employed.

After some time, all the men between 17-45 were ordered to report one Friday afternoon at the Schulhoif. The explanation given was that an important personality was expected in town in order to lecture on the situation and to make an important announcement. The men were requested to appear in festive dress so as to make a good impression on the visitor. The gendarmes and militia apparently did not put too much trust in these explanations for on the appointed Friday, they went from house to house, forcing men to come out. When all the men had assembled, they were herded into the Shul, the doors were closed behind them, and armed guards posted. After a selection, the sick and invalids were freed. The others, some 100 men, were sent to forced labor to the armament works and explosive plants in the township of Gainefke in the Bolvez forest. Letters arriving from Gainefke were read in the synagogue on Shabbat. They told of hard labor, bad food, and terrible living and sanitary conditions. Despair mounted among the people in Piesk when rumors started circulating that the forced laborers would be sent to the front for the building of fortifications. A few months later, the Germans pulled another trick. One night, the soldiers raided the town, carried some 50-60 men out of their homes and locked them up in the cellar of **Reb Sholem**

the pharmacist. The cellar was sealed off, having only one small barred window. The soldiers were so pleased with their success that they got drunk and went to sleep in their quarters, not far from the cellar. Among the prisoners was **Reb Yona LEV**. His wife, who came looking for him, talked to him through the bars. Afterwards, she ran home and returned with an iron rod, a hammer, pliers, and other tools, as he had asked her. Although there was a night curfew, the Germans decided, after their successful raid, that they could sleep in peace and forego guarding. Meanwhile, the prisoners started working on the bars, singing all the while in order to drown the sounds of metal. They managed to bend the bars and escaped one after the other through the window. The only one to stay behind was **Leib "Chanok"**, a mentally retarded. They dispersed to other districts where they could go about freely. The next day, the Germans took their revenge. They went berserk, arresting the old, and the sick and invalids indiscriminately and threatened to send them for hard labor in the Bolvez forests for unlimited time as replacement for those who had escaped. After this raid, the town looked again like after the battles between Russians and Germans in September 1915. No one dared leave his house, not even to fetch water. Hunger was general; and the sick received no treatment. In the meantime, negotiations started between the Kommandant and the "Burgermeister" and relatives of the escapees. Some 25 from among the relatives reported to the Kommandant and told him that they could not give up the escapees, as they did not know where they had gone. They themselves were prepared to replace them. The following day, the group was shipped off from Volkovysk railway station, in sealed cattle trucks, to the Bolvez forests. This author, who was only 15 at the time, was also among the substitutes. First, his brother Moishe was forcibly dragged from the house. Then, the father was arrested. Therefore, he humored the Kommandant and offered to go instead of his father. The offer was accepted. This was on October 15, 1917. The replacement group stayed for 10 weeks in the Bolvez forest. This author was part of the team that received the trees from the lumberjacks. The fallen trees had to be measured and prepared for shipment. Two 71-waggon trains left daily. Part of the trees went straight to Germany, part to the saw mills, 7 km. distant. The author did not suffer too much during those weeks. As he worked well, he was given three soup rations daily. Moreover, the local commander, a Lieutenant Adolph Spiegler, aged 50, treated him well and told him that he, too, had a 15 year- old fair-haired son. Still, homesickness was very strong, especially on Shabbat. The urge for freedom became stronger, as life in the forest was very much like in prison. According to instructions, every worker had to report at 7 in the morning and have his job-card stamped in the office. The author collected all the cards of his teammates and took them to the administration hut where he worked. Thus, he saved his comrades several kilometers walk a day. The lieutenant promised to try and obtain permission from his superiors to send the home group home on Christmas leave. The men had made up their minds that, if the promise was kept, they would not return to the forest but escape. When Christmas Day approached, the Lieutenant announced that, according to the instructions received, the group could not go on leave before a replacement group arrived from Piesk. As there was no longer a chance of escaping during, a new plan was made. There were two Gentiles in the group who had attempted several escapes before, had succeeded in crossing two-thirds of the way but had been captured again. It was decided to make use of their experience. On Christmas Eve, at 10:30 p.m., fifteen

men started out. The hour was chosen because that night, and on Christmas day, the prisoners were allowed to move freely on the roads. Several Gentiles were in the group. The two experienced ones proved very useful the first night but disappeared the next day. The group marched only at night, in a northerly direction, through dense forests. Daytime, they hid among the trees. In the space of one week, they covered some 120-km. After untold hardship, they reached home, completely exhausted. Some had to be carried by their comrades the last lap of the way as they suffered from frostbite and wounded feet. Great was the joy in the town, as the people there had despaired of ever seeing their sons again. But the authorities learned of the break and demanded that the escapees be handed over. This was not done. This author, for instance, remained hidden for 5 months in his aunt's house.

The soldiers searched the **Borovski** house time and again but the family claimed that their son had disappeared. Thus, ended the slave labor in Bolvez Forest. At the end of 1918, when the Germans were about to evacuate the area, they became indifferent and stopped interfering with life in the township. On the other hand, bands of robbers organized and occasionally raided the localities. A self-defense was founded in Piesk. Ex- servicemen and seasoned soldiers obtained arms and set up an exemplary organization. The leaders were **Zeev ROZANSKI** and a Gentile. As it became known that strict guard was held in the township, there was never an attempt to attack. Early in January 1919, the Germans left the town quietly, as if fleeing from the place they had ruled by force for three years and four months. A few days after their departure, the Soviets arrived. Fighting broke out between them and the Poles; and the town changed hands several times. Every occupation was accomplished by looting from the warring sides. At the beginning of July 1920, the Soviets returned again. This time, fighting with the Poles was severe and lasted several days. In the end, the Poles left but not before looting the town thoroughly and injuring the population. The Soviets held the town for three months. In September, after their defeat in the Battle of Warsaw, the Red Army retreated hurriedly and left Piesk.

POLISH RULE

From 1919 until September 1939, the Poles ruled the area. This was not the first time that the Polish eagle had spread its wings over the administration. It had done so from 1381-1795, i.e. for 414 years, following which there was a 120-year interruption of Polish rule. The Russians ruled over the area of 115 years and the Germans for 4 more. After World War I, when Czarist Russia, Wilhelm's Germany and Franz Josef's Austria collapsed, Poland was revived as in its Golden Era prior to the 1795 Partition. The Jews nourished the hope that, after the nightmare of German occupation and the oppression under the Russian conquest, their human rights would be restored. But the little town that so eagerly awaited a return to normal life after the changes of rule and the sufferings of war, soon knew further disappointments. The Legionnaires and General Haller's soldiers were incited by the same elements in the government and the army who accused the Jews of siding with the Bolsheviks. Searches were carried out and

many people arrested, although they had no connection whatever with communism. The arrested were transferred to other towns for interrogation. Prominent Jews did everything in their power to obtain the release of the innocents but only rarely succeeded. The restored Polish rule openly displayed hostility and anti-Semitism. Treatment was brutal, barbaric. Old Jews were caught and tied to a pole in the middle of the market place. Their trousers were removed; and they were given twenty-five strokes of the whip. The victims, many of them half-dead, required medical aid. Beards and side-locks would be cut off, sometimes, half a beard and one side-lock. Sometimes also, a Jew would be caught; and his beard plucked out hair by hair until he lost consciousness. In fact, the Poles were even worse than the Cossacks and the Germans. The Jews tried to protect themselves. They used their connections with the landowners. More than once, **Strike SHAPIRA** was sent to WAISFING, the squire of Etrovitza, in order to save one or the other Jew. His intervention was always successful. Rumors reached the outer world. At the time, the American government supported the renaissance of Poland with money, military equipment and economic help. The Jews of America started exerting pressure. An enquiry commission was sent, headed by Henry MORGENTHAU. Afterwards, the situation became somewhat easier but still far from satisfactory. True, the Jews managed to send their own deputy to the Polish "Sejm," **GRINBERG**, who fought like a lion for the rights of his people.

But Minister Grabski carried through such heavy taxes and levies on Jewish merchants that many of them went bankrupt. In 1939, World War II broke out. Three million Jews were exterminated by the Nazis, assisted not a little by Poles. The few Jews who remain in Poland after the Holocaust still suffer from anti-Semitism.