



The History of Jewish Life in Vladimirets

Geography & History

Vladimirets was a typical Jewish shtetl in the Pale of Settlement. Jewish life in Vladimirets has two bookends, approximately 150 years apart. The earliest known Jewish community in this town was late 18th century, which corresponds to the expulsion of Jews across Western Europe and the creation of the [Pale of Settlement](#).

The town may be listed under Ukraine, Poland, Russia (USSR), or Belarus (White Russia). Variations on the name include: Vladimerec, Vlodimiretz (Yiddish), Wladimirets (German), Volodymyrets (Ukrainian) and Włodzimierzec (Polish). It is also often confused with Vladimir Volynsk or Vladymir Volinskij (Russian) because that town is the Vladimirets in the Vohlyn region. The two towns also have similar names in Yiddish, which has added to the confusion.



It wasn't until 1809 that the Russian Tzarist Government required Jews to adopt fixed, inheritable family names so that they might be more easily identified for taxation and conscription. Any records previous to 1809, if we could find them, would simply be of the "Name, son/daughter of Name" type of record. However, as late as the middle of the 19th century, Russian Government officials were still complaining about the frequent change of family names among Jews who lived in different communities under different surnames. Often these different surnames were simply variations due to the lack of vowels used in Hebrew Names. For example, בריל became Baril, Barill (USA), Brill, Barel, Bariel, Baryl, and probably countless other variations as yet undiscovered.

Unlike some shtetls, Vladimirets never had a "Jewish Ghetto" – Jews and non-Jews lived as neighbors until the 1940's when Nationalist Ukrainians working with the Nazis began rounding up outlying Jews and bringing them to Vladimirets. The 1939 census shows a thriving Jewish community with 1,377 members – today there are no Jews left from before WWII. After the war (1945), some Jews came back to locate survivors or try to find justice. They found neither and did not stay. The last Jew left Vladimirets in 1948 for Israel.

Community Life

The Jewish community in Vladimirets was diverse. There were at least 6 shuls (synagogues): Trisk Chasidim, Stepan Chasidim, Stopan Chasidim, the Craftsman's Synagogue, and Conservative. There were also many "shteibels" [usually a one-room building just for davening], study groups and minyans held in people's homes. There was no orthodox/non-orthodox distinction – it was only observant or less observant. Many families who went to Chassidic shuls would not align themselves with the ultra-orthodox Chasidim once they left Vladimirets.

Several of the shuls had schools (cheders or Talmud Torahs) associated with them and most Jews (including the women) were well educated. Most could read and write – often in several languages. The shul was the hub of the Jewish social community as well as the religious center. Everyone would have attended shul every Shabbos (Shabbat) for the chance to see friends and family they didn't get to see during the week.

Typical of Jewish shtetls, Vladimirets was not a wealthy community. Because of the laws, Jews weren't allowed to own land or anything that hadn't been owned before, which meant that most Jews were merchants of some sort. One Jew, however, owned the grain mill in town. Others were carpenters and shokhets (ritual slaughterers), junk men and furniture makers, and of course, teachers and rabbis. Given the time and conditions, the Jewish families of Vladimirets were doing reasonably well for themselves.

Those who remember Vladimirets before the war often refer to Jewish Vladimiretsers as "good people living a simple pious life". While some of this may be the glow of nostalgia, there is most likely an element of truth in it. Everyone kept kosher (it's a lot easier to keep when everyone around you is kosher). If a family needed assistance the word went out and help would be found or perhaps a basket of food mysteriously left on a doorstep. Skills such as midwifery and healing were freely shared. The Jews of Vladimirets lived together harmoniously, different factions playing pranks on each other that would be forgiven with payment of damages and a bottle of *samogon* (moonshine, home-brewed alcohol) shared.

There is a story in the Talmud about a rabbi making a determination of kashrut over a Shabbos chicken that had been dropped on the floor – if the family could afford a new chicken and there was enough time, the rabbi is to give the chicken a blessing of purification and require that the chicken be given to the poor; however, if the family couldn't afford a new chicken, then the rabbi is required to simply give the blessing of purification and explain that the laws of kashrut are not intended to be used to make someone go hungry. This is the kind of simple common sense that permeated Jewish life in Vladimirets. The days, the weeks and the year cycled around the Jewish holidays, the simchas of births, Bar Mitzvahs and weddings, and the punctuations of funerals and sitting shiva. Even the differing values of rival youth groups never split families or the community into different factions. They saw themselves as Jews. Whether bad time or good, it was shared by all as part of Jewish community.

Emigration

Due to travel restrictions, emigration and travel happened in waves. Somewhere around 1910 - 1925, there must have been a lifting of travel bans in the Pale, because we start to see Jews traveling back and forth to Vladimirets from other towns and other countries. [Khmelnitskiy's pogroms](#) and World War I touched Vladimirets deeply – many families emigrated to America or what was then British Palestine because of the violence of the pogroms. Many of us think of pogroms as similar to Kristallnacht ("Night of the Broken Glass"), where the windows of Jewish shops were broken, because that is what is shown in Hollywood movies. However, Kristallnacht also included setting fires and terrorizing Jews, and pogroms across Europe focused on burning the Jews out, often beating and robbing them as they tried to put out the flames or tried to escape the fires. In 1934, a particularly violent pogrom left Jewish Vladimirets in rubble, with many Jews murdered. It was time to leave.



הרחוב הראשי לפני הדליקה הגדולה



הוועדה הממשלתית להערכת נזקי הדליקה ב' 1934

עמוד 7

[Photos: Before and after the 1934 pogrom in Vladimirets. Source: Sefer Vladimirets.]

Most Jewish families emigrated from Vladimirets between 1900 and 1930. While many came to the United States or Canada, others settled in British Palestine (Israel) and South America. Of those who came to the United States, most settled in Detroit, Michigan, or at least started out there. Other major draws were New York City and Boston. Canadians would land at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and migrate to Montreal or Toronto.

There was another major wave of emigration after the pogroms of the 1930's. Special passports and travel papers were

required to make aliyah to Eretz Yisrael. They were often decided by lottery. Because travel to North America was easier, passenger manifests show many families emigrating to the United States, although it was already beginning to close the door to Jewish immigration, and Canada.

Aside from pogroms and Nazis, some of our family emigrated for economic opportunity or other reasons. Some of them came to the United States with the intention of earning lots of money and returning as rich men. There is at least one story of a man who emigrated to avoid conscription into the Russian Army. One woman came to the United States because she wanted the freedom to be non-religious.

Zionism was strong in Vladimirets and the surrounding Vohlyn region. Vladimirets supported multiple Zionist youth groups. Some were able to make aliyah and emigrate to Israel, then British Palestine. In some ways, it was easier to emigrate to America. The local rabbis were split – while they all agreed that living in Eretz Yisrael was better, some actively discouraged moving to the United States because of the fear that they would lose their Jewishness.

Post-WWII emigration appears to be largely to Palestine/Israel although there was already a Zionist movement in Vladimirets long before. Zionism was strong in Vladimirets and the surrounding Vohlyn region. Vladimirets supported multiple Zionist youth groups. Some were able to make aliyah and leave for Israel, then called British Palestine. The local rabbis were split – while they all agreed that living in Eretz Yisrael was better for the Zionist movement in general, they recognized emigrating to America was usually easier and offered more opportunity. A number of them actively discouraged moving to the United States because of the fear that those settling there would lose their Jewishness.

World War II Years

As World War II drew closer, the former residents of Vladimirets formed a benevolence society, a "landsmanshaften". They worked throughout WWII to raise funds to help those in Vladimirets. Many were convinced to emigrate, but there were those who chose to stay behind or couldn't emigrate for some reason. Their names were memorialized in the Vladimirets Yizkor Book. The Vladimirets Landsman Society was disbanded in the U.S. in the 1960s, but still continues in Israel. [Please see the [yizkor translation index](#) for the English translation of the yizkor book.]

By the middle of WWII, Jews who traveled to larger cities for work and those with families in other countries were already hearing about the Jewish Ghettos and roundups in Poland. They knew about the camps – there were labor camps in the area, and frequently Jews were forced to provide labor for "civic projects", such as rebuilding the bridge in Antonovka. Many Jews never returned from this forced labor, or returned beaten and starving. With travel severely restricted, the Jews of Vladimirets could already feel the noose closing, but many of the elders remembered WWI, and stated Vladimirets had survived the Germans before, this time would be no different. Others simply didn't have the resources to leave, or didn't want to go if they couldn't take their whole family. The Judenrat of Vladimirets, a Jewish Council that helped to govern the Jewish community, was effective in negotiating with the gentiles, so the general feeling was that this situation could be endured until it ended, at which point, life would return to normal.

During the 1940's, Vladimirets was under Ukrainian Nationalist occupation, which was allied with the Nazis. Jews from surrounding areas were forced to move to the larger towns and villages, including Vladimirets. They lived together in a Jewish ghetto, and were forced to work the neighboring farms for the occupation forces. Pogroms and terror campaigns were common during this time. The Judenrat served as an intermediary with the occupying police / military forces. Some members of the Judenrat are noted at the bottom of the [Vladimirets Surname](#) page. To the Jews, it didn't seem to make a difference whether Vladimirets was occupied by the Russian army, the German army, or whoever else wandered through – the occupiers always took more than they gave, and officers made a point of taking advantage by taking as much as they could without paying.

One thing that the yizkor book makes clear is that many people went into hiding both before and during the massacre. In Vladimirets, there was a clear division between Poles and Ukrainians – the Ukrainians were on the side of the Germans and helped hunt down Jews, while the Poles hid them and aided in their escape. This may have been because the priest of the Vladimirets Pravo-Slavic church (the Polish Orthodox Christian church) was not only not anti-semitic, he was actively sympathetic towards the Jews. At one point, when the Nazis had demanded payment from the Jews so many times that they could no longer raise the money, the priest collected from his own congregation to give to the Jews so they could pay off the demand. There are cases of Poles both turning away Jews for fear of losing their own lives and Poles giving their own lives in defense of Jews. But the Ukrainians always sided with the Nazis, having been the target of the [Ukrainian Genocide](#) by Stalin.

The Remnants of Jewish Vladimirets

There is a central cemetery near Vladimirets, which was also used by neighboring shtetlach (towns too small to even be called shtetls). This cemetery is not listed and/or protected as a landmark or monument. It is poorly marked, and surrounded by a broken fence with no gate. The cemetery has no special sections. There are no remaining original stones. There is a mass grave, and some mass burial sites are marked with family names. The cemetery was vandalized during WWII, but in the last 10 years has been left alone. [The previous information is from JewishGen's cemetery database, but it may have been misidentified as a Jewish cemetery. Visitors to the area have not been able to locate this central Jewish cemetery. The mass burial site is still there. See [2006 Vladimirets photos](#)]



There was another Jewish cemetery, which is now near the center of town. After the war, the Communists built a government building and factory on the site. The headstones were ground up and used in the cement for the sidewalks. All that remains is a grassy yard. There is no marker. The Catholic and Pravo-Slavic cemeteries were not destroyed. (updated 1997) [See [2006 Vladimirets photos](#)] The headstones were reportedly ground up and used as cement material for the sidewalks in the government square. The Soviets did not do the same to the Catholic or Slavic cemeteries. (updated 2008)

A memorial site in the Zhulkin Forest shows where Jews were murdered. There is a stone at the site in Russian and Hebrew. It states "Stand and pay attention to this place. Here on August 28, 1942 German fascists occupants martyred more than 3,000 Soviet citizens. History will not forget and forgive them and their barbaric actions. May the victims rest in peace." (note: The numbers do not match the Vladimirets Jewish population because often Jews were brought from neighboring towns to a central area to be killed.) ([Go to the writings of the final moments of the Jews of Vladimirets, from the Sefer Vladimirets](#))



The mass grave is rarely visited, and there is little to no ongoing maintenance, although local municipal authorities did re-erect stones and clear some vegetation some time back. A group of Vladimirets survivors visited the area in 2000, and have arranged with a local man for annual maintenance. (updated 2007)

When I was little, I used to ask about Vladimirets. My bubbe (Rifka Chase Barill) would say "Why are you asking about that place? There's nothing left. Nothing to tell." Eventually, I realized that the town was still there, even some of the buildings. I thought she was wrong, that she was just covering up the pain of losing so much. It took me a long time to realize that she was right -- the Jewish community of Vladimirets is gone, there's nothing left. However, it still has a lot to tell us about where we came from.