

A Brief History of Rokytno

ROKYTNE

Rokytno is a village near Sarny and Rovno in Volynskaya Oblast, Ukraine. It was part of Poland between the two world wars. Its original name was Okhotnikovits; its current name came from a nearby village and from the Rokitnanka River.

Rokytno became an urban settlement in 1905 with the growth of the lumber trade, the opening of the glassworks factory and the laying of the railway between Kovel and Kiev. A local legend speaks of an ancient town with a large Jewish population that was destroyed during the Khmelnytsky pogroms in the seventeenth century. There is an old Jewish cemetery in a village near Rokytno that supports the existence of an old Jewish community.

Young Jewish families began arriving in town at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of them came from nearby villages. The Belgian glassworks factory was headed by Eliahu Michaelovitch Rosenberg, a converted Jew (his wife was a niece of the Russian Treasury Minister) from St. Petersburg. Rosenberg built housing for workers, planted a public garden and erected a winter palace for himself.

The Jews of Rokytno were well integrated into the developing economy of the town. They earned their livelihood from commerce and by supplying services to the workers. The brick factory, lemonade and soda plants, and some local quarries and lumber mills were owned by Jews. There were also two inns operated by Jews.

Small merchants, craftsmen and the handicapped were helped by a benevolent fund which depended on donations from wage earners. The fund developed into a "popular bank".

Rokytno was close to the Jewish community of Sarny. There were also small settlements in Budki Borovski, Budki Snovidovich, Borovey, Blezov, Bialoviez, Berezov, Glinna, Dekht, Voytkevich, Volcia Gorka, Zalavie, Tupyk, Masievich, Netreba, Stariki Snovidovich, Kisorich, Karpiluvka with some Jewish families.

Within a few years a young Jewish community was established in Rokytno. Its members studied Torah and observed its commandments, but the town also became the social and spiritual centre of the area. Rabbi Aaron Shames served the community. Jewish life centered around the Old Synagogue (Magen Avraham). The courtyard of the synagogue had a *mikveh* (ritual bath) and a *hekdesh* (sick room and hostel for the poor).

In the early 1920s a Hebrew school was established- Tarbut School. Many pupils studied there. In 1934 the school initiated a Hebrew speaking group, a library and a newspaper. A drama group as well as an orchestra were active in the school and performed on many occasions.

The Zionist movement came to Rokytno from nearby Sarny. The local branch of Zionists was mostly active in teaching Hebrew, distributing *shkalim* (money) and collecting money for Jewish National Fund. It also fought the "Bund" (a secular Jewish socialist movement), which was against any ties to *Eretz*

Israel. Initially, the Zionists had a strong influence on youth. In 1924 a branch of *Hechalutz* was established. Its purpose was to prepare its members for *Aliyah* (immigration to Israel), and members had to undergo preparatory training (*hachshara*). *Beitar* (a Zionist youth movement) was founded in 1923; it held many sports and educational activities. There was also *Hashomer Hatsair* (a socialist Zionist secular youth movement) in town. *Brith Hehayal* came in 1933 and provided military and physical training.

In 1939 there were 3,500 Jews in Rokytno and its surrounding villages.

The Holocaust period

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-aggression Pact was signed in August 1939 between the USSR and Germany. Under the pact, Poland would be dismembered and split between Germany and the Soviet Union. The Germans started WWII in September 1939 by invading Poland; as a result, parts of eastern Poland were annexed by the Soviets. The Red Army entered Rokytno soon after. The Jewish population cooperated with the new rulers, but all Jewish institutions were closed.

On June 22, 1941 war broke out between Germany and the USSR. At the time, there were 2,350 Jews in Rokytno.

The Germans soon conquered the area and the Soviets retreated. As soon as the Germans entered Rokytno, assaults against the Jews began. A *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) was established, and in April, 1942 a ghetto was erected. A Jewish police force came into being. The synagogue building was used by the Germans as a workshop where Jewish craftsmen were employed. Bitter hunger was felt in the ghetto almost the entire time.

On August 26, 1942, a count of the Jewish population was held in the market square. 1,631 Jews were lined up, men and women separated. Young children joined their mothers. Rifles were fired and 300 people were immediately killed. About 400 Jews were transported by train to Sarny where they were shot together with Jews from nearby villages. The remainder of the Rokytno Jews fled to the forest where many were captured and murdered by the Ukrainians. Others joined the partisans and a few simply survived in the forest.

Jews of Rokytno who fled with the retreating Soviet troops at the beginning of the war joined up and fought in the ranks of the Red Army.

Most of the survivors of the Rokytno Jewish community emigrated to Israel after the war. A few went to Australia, Canada, United States and other countries.