

## Koidanov, by Bruce Gribetz

Koidanov was a shtetl located approximately twenty-five miles southwest of the city of Minsk, in White Russia. In 1776 there were 560 Jews paying the poll tax. The town became a hasidic center in 1833, but the misnagdim remained in the majority. By 1847 there were roughly 2,500 Jews living in Koidanov. This number increased to 3,000 in 1900. The proportion of Jews to Gentiles in the town itself is difficult to calculate, but taking into consideration those goyim of the rural environs, the Jews were appreciably outnumbered.<sup>1</sup>

Most of what distinguishes Koidanov historically and characteristically, stems from two major factors; Koidanov's proximity to the old Polish border, and the town's railroad station. In 1917-1918, after the Bolshevicks withdrew from World War I, the Jews suffered severely from the marauding of demobilized Russian soldiers. Finally, in 1920, the town was set on fire by the retreating Polish army. During the unstable period following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Jewish population in Koidanov began to decline. There were only 1,788 Jews in 1926.

While the numbers of Jews in Koidanov had remained relatively constant (until World War I), the society itself did not. That is to say, Koidanov had always been a 'jumping off point' for Jews and Gentiles. The railroad station was conveniently situated mid-way between Moscow and Warsaw. Many Poles left from Koidanov to go to central Russia. Minsk's propinquity was also tempting to the Jews. As a result, there always existed a steady stream of out-goers and new-comers in Koidanov.

In 1935, Koidanov was renamed Dzerzhinsk in honor of a Russian police chief, Dzerzhinski, who was active during the first revolution. Today there stands a monument to this man in the middle of what once was the market place.

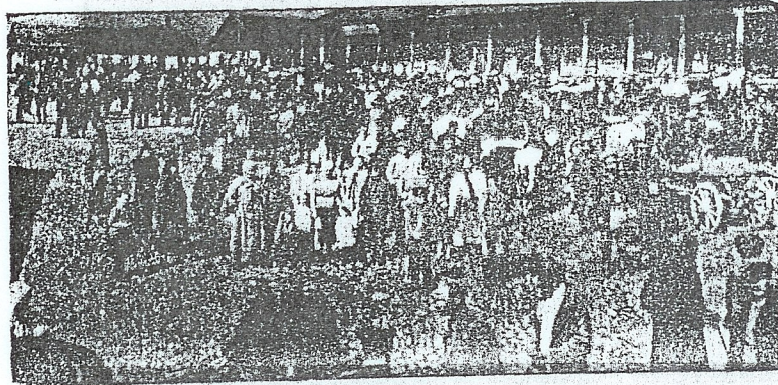
On October 21, 1941, during the Second World War, following the Nazi occupation of the town, 1,600 Jews were murdered in Dzerzhinsk (Koidanov). This was essentially the entire Jewish population. Nine Jews survived.

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<sup>1</sup>"Koidanov." Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971, Vo. 10, p.1154.



Koidanov centered around the 'mark,' or the market place. The mark was a large plaza with many stores around it, and stalls in the center. Each store owner had to pay a tax to the local land-owner. Literally, all roads led from the mark.



דער קוידענאָווער מאַרק מיט די קראַמען

From the mark, the shtetl's six major streets proceeded in four directions. Each thoroughfare was named after the place to which it pointed: Alter Minska Gasse, Nier Minska Gass, Vilnagasse (or Mickovichis Gasse), Parabotzka Gasse, Slutzdergasse and Ruvizhevetzer Gass.



אַ בילד פֿון אַ קוידענאָווער גאַס (רוביוועוויצער)

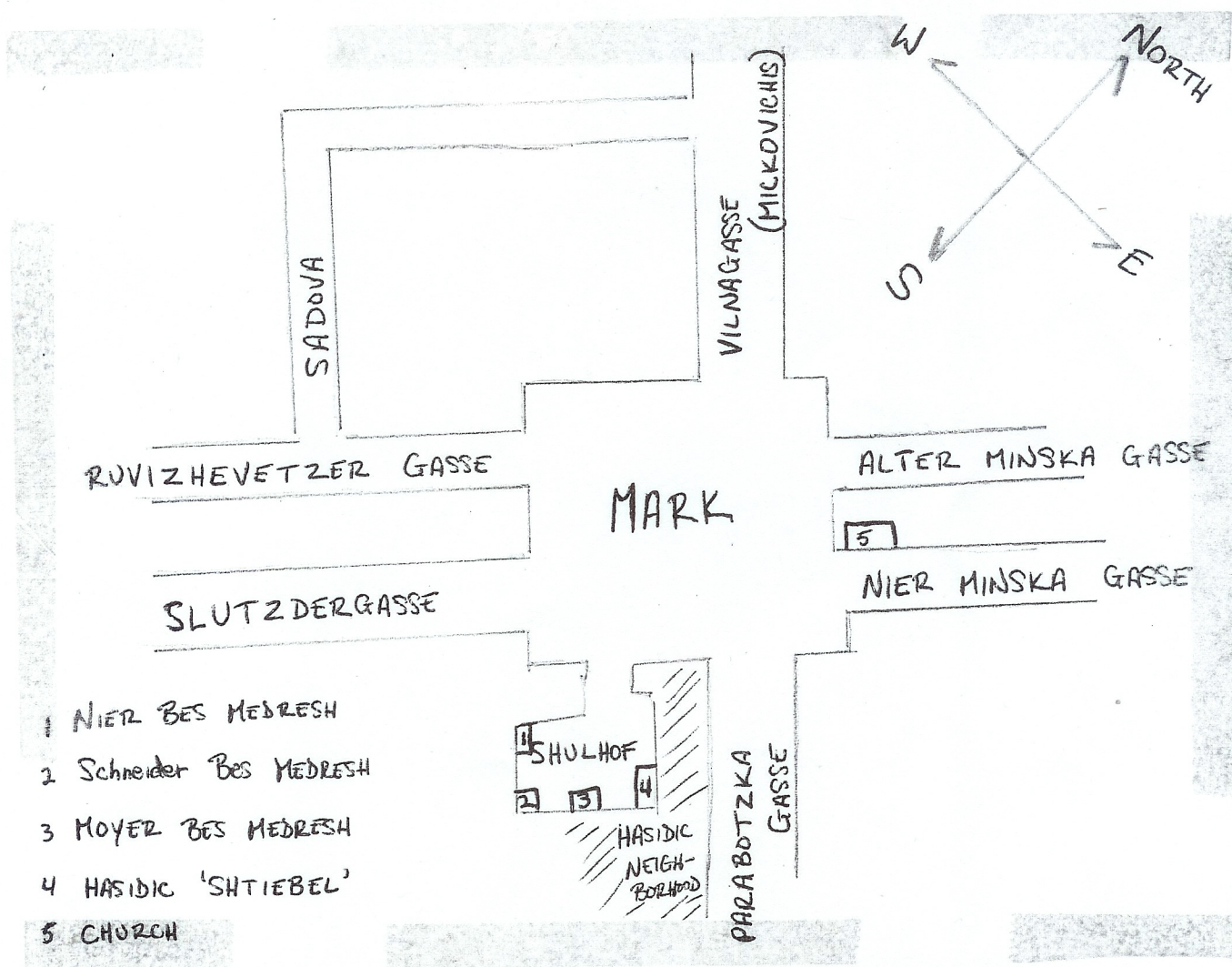
Nier Minska Gasse, for example, led all the way to Minsk.

The Jewish population lived in the center of the town, near the mark. Except for one street near the center of Koidanov called Sadova, on which mostly goyim lived, most of the goyim



were to be found further ~~out~~ from the mark.<sup>2</sup> As one proceeded away from the center, each street slowly changed from almost exclusively Jewish to goyish.

Strangely enough, although the area surrounding the mark was Jewish, on Nier Minska Gasse near where the street led into the mark, stood (and still stands) a Catholic church - a remnant of the times prior to the second partition of Poland, when Koidanov was in the Polish domain. The church offered quite a contrast to the shabbiness of the Jewish structures. "To us it looked like a very fancy edifice, because our house was wooden, and it was at least partially stone."<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup>Taken from personal interview with Deborah Heller Feuerchtgott, former resident of Koidanov.



On the southeastern side of the mark, there was a small street leading into the Shulhof, or the 'Synagogue Court.' In this small square were to be found all of the synagogues of Koidanov. The main synagogue was called the Moyer Bes Medresh (the Brick Synagogue). Inside the Moyer Bes Medresh building was a second, smaller synagogue, called the Klein<sup>e</sup>r Bes Medresh. These were two separate entities with different Ravs and congregations.

Another synagogue was the Nier Bes Medresh (the New Synagogue). "Well, it was called the Nier Bes Medresh, but since I was born it was called nier!"<sup>3</sup> Then there was the Shneider Bes Medresh (the Tailor's Synagogue). It was not limited to tailors, but also claimed shoemakers and manual laborers among its congregants.

Finally, and quite separate from the rest, there was the Hasidic Synagogue - simply called the 'shtiebel'. "It was by the end of the shulhof....it was like a whole palace where the hasidic Rabbi lived, and where his married children lived in different houses."<sup>4</sup> Beside the shtiebel was the 'outer shtiebel', where the hasidim gathered on the more ceremonious occasions, such as the Passover sedarim and during Succos. The function of the outer shtiebel was to accomodate the overflow of hasidim from out of Koidanov, who came to spend the holidays near the Tsaddik. While the misnagdic community was spread out over the entire center of the shtetl, the hasidim were concentrated in the area immediate to the shtiebel.

The railroad station was, in fact, not inside Koidanov, but just outside the town limits. "A popular pastime of a Saturday afternoon was for the folks to get together and take a stroll to the station and there the trains used to come in from Minsk."<sup>5</sup>

In Koidanov there had always been a plethora of what we would call lower-middle income Jews. There were also quite a number of poor people. They were taken care of by the various

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<sup>3</sup>Taken from personal interview with Abraham Evans, former resident of Koidanov.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Taken from personal interview with Isaiah Heller, former resident of Koidanov.



Jewish-funded institutions for the indigent. The few 'wealthy' Jews (on par with middle-class Americans) were those who dealt with loans, and the professionals, such as the dentist.

Despite the several Batei Medresh, the misnagdic community adhered to the word of one Rabbi. Through much of the 19th century, this Rabbi was a member of the Heller family. The first one was Rav Yisrael Heller, an astute leader who wrote explanations to the Gemara (Tif'eret Ysrael). He was succeeded by his son Rav Avraham Hayim Heller, who in turn was followed by his son, Rav Yechiel Heller. At this time, the misnagdim became dissatisfied with their Rabbi. A 'rebellion' ensued, after which another Rabbi was "brought down" (presumably from Minsk). This was Rabbi Hirsch. Hirsch only had daughters, so next in line followed one of his sons-in-law.

This concise piece of history regarding the succession of the Koidanov Rabbis is significant in its illustration of the situation in every shtetl in Europe. Although each Rabbi generally passed on the leadership to his son or son-in-law, there was a requirement of a degree of erudition involved. If a Rabbi's son did not measure up to the community's standards, he could be 'substituted' by another man of more acceptable qualifications.

Although a predominantly misnagdic town, Koidanov had enough of a hasidic community to have had its own hasidic dynasty. The Koidanov hasidic dynasty was a branch of the Marlin trend of hasidism. "Its founder was Soloman Hayyim (Perlov) of Koidanov (1797-1862), grandson of Tsaddikim Asher of Stolin and Mordecai of Lachowicze....His influence spread to the northern part of Polesye and beyond into Belorussia (Minsk)."<sup>6</sup> The 'father to son' passage of the hasidic dynasty often resulted in unqualified leadership. Koidanov hasidim had the good fortune to have a series of very scholarly Tsaddikim. "The typically 'Lithuanian character' of the Koidanov movement expressed itself in the form of more Torah (i.e. study of the law) than in Volhynia and the Ukraine, and less mysticism than in Poland."<sup>7</sup> "In the 'day's programme' printed in

<sup>6</sup>"Koidanov." Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971, vol.10, p. 1152.

<sup>7</sup>Dr. Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch, Lithuanian Hasidism, p.169.



his name (R. Solomon Hayyim, first Tsaddik of Koidanov) on the title page of the prayer book, time is allocated for the daily study of the Gemara and the Shulhan Arukh...."<sup>8</sup>

Another important feature of Koidanov hasidism was its concern for Eretz Yisrael. This feeling manifested itself in the Koidanov 'kolel' in Tiberias.

Despite their being a minority group, the hasidim got along quite well with the misnagdim - to the point of an occasional intermarriage. Of course there had been one or two periods of tension between the two groups, but nothing serious.

"The only conflict I know, was way before I was born... The hasidic Rabbi, Rav Aralla (i.e. R. Aharon of Koidanov) was a very learned man, but he lived a very high life, above his means. So one of his sons borrowed money from the people in Koidanov (apparently from the misnagdim) ....And then he went semi-bankrupt."<sup>9</sup>

The incident had a happy ending however, as we are told by an eye-witness account.

"...the Rebbe was prosecuted by one of his creditors...and was obliged to appear in the district court in Vilna... What I saw on that day make a tremendous impression on me. I had a feeling that here under my very eyes there was a direct link, both visible and invisible, between the Rebbe in the district court in Vilna, the hasidim in Koidanov, and the Holy One Blessed Be He in Heaven...After a day of great emotional tension, the last telegram arrived: the Rebbe had been acquitted and the hasidim were to sing the song of praise Az Yashir... The misnagdim too, joined in the rejoicing..."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the relationship between the hasidim and the misnagdim can best be described by this concrete example of the educational system: During the time of the hasidic Rav Yosef of Koidanov, his son-in-law, Rav Nachum Rabinowitz organized a hasidic yeshiva in the shtetl, in which about one hundred and fifty pupils studied. Hasidic youths from neighboring shtetls soon arrived, penniless. In which households did these boys get their meals? "In the misnagdim, in the hasidim, or anyplace!"<sup>11</sup> In fact several of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-163.

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview, Evans, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Rabinowitsch, op. cit., p. 166.

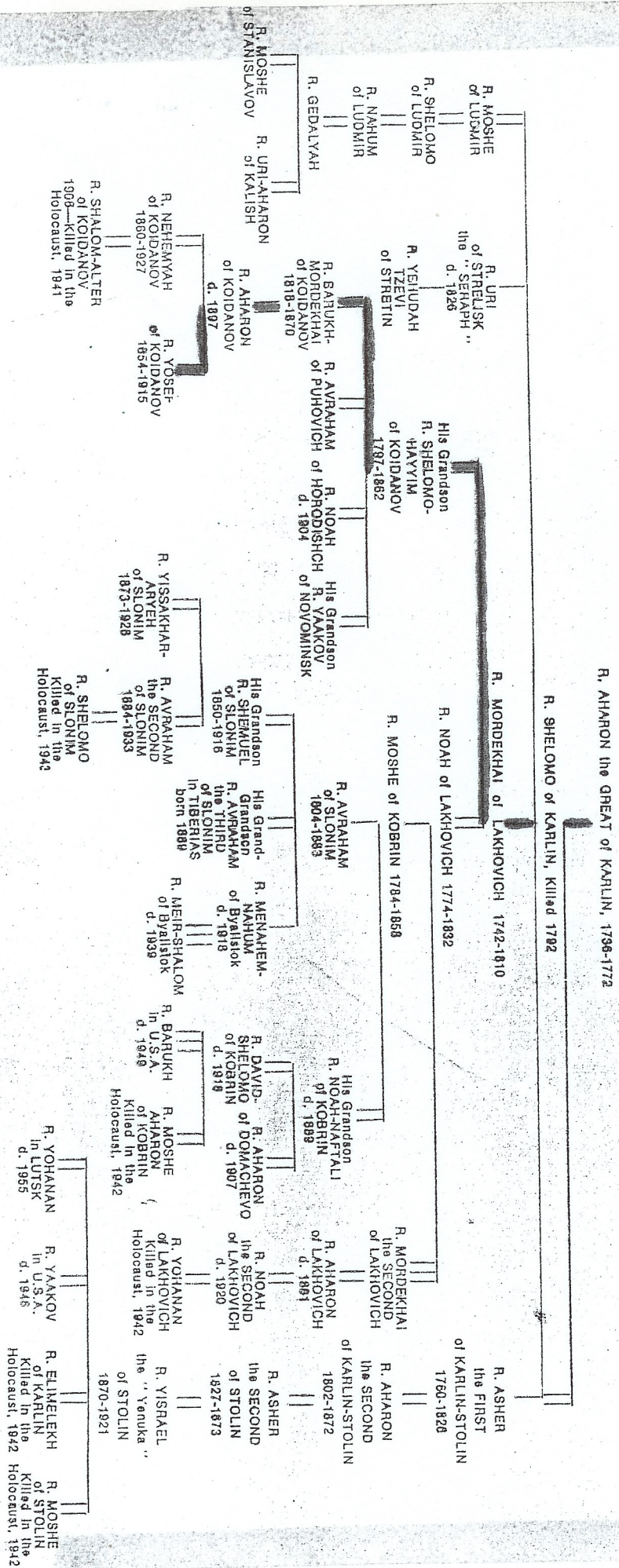
<sup>11</sup> Personal interview, Evans, op. cit.



# GENEALOGICAL TABLE OF THE KARLIN DYNASTY AND ITS BRANCHES

THE CHRONOLOGICAL DETAILS CONCERNING THE TSADDIKIM OF THE LAST GENERATIONS WERE PROVIDED BY THEIR DESCENDANTS

LEGEND: | DISCIPLINE || SON, GRANDSON || SON-IN-LAW





teachers in the hasidic yeshiva were misnagdim!

In the aftermath of the 'mass exodus' from Koidanov in 1916, the hasidic center in Koidanov disappeared. Rav Yosef left for Minsk in such a hurry that he refused to wait for his pregnant daughter to give birth in Koidanov. The wagon ride of twenty-five miles to Minsk was very rough on the girl, and just as they arrived in Minsk, she bore a still-born child.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between the Jews of Koidanov and the goyim can be described as not bad, but not good either. "Jews lived their lives and the non-Jews lived theirs....in business the Jews were small merchants and the non-Jews did business with us all the time."<sup>13</sup> In addition to the business transactions, another factor necessitated an intermingling between the two peoples. The peasants' church was located in the center of the shtetl, in the middle of the Jewish neighborhood. Every Sunday,....

"They would come in for services.....They would come down the street walking barefoot with boots slung over their shoulders. The theory is that you walk normally barefoot, but when you enter the church, you have to be on your best --that's when you slip your boots on."<sup>14</sup>

The Jews on the outlying streets did their best not to attract attention on holidays.

"On Passover when we had the sedarim, they used to have shutters on the windows and they used to really enclose themselves....from the outside.... hide more or less...and not carry on. It was very quiet. We didn't want to attract the goyim."<sup>15</sup>

Although the Jews and the goyim got along without a major incident until World War I, there always lurked a sense of fear.

"We always had a shikse working for us...She must have stolen something, and one day the police appeared to notify my mother and grandmother that she had killed herself by throwing herself on the (railroad) tracks...My family and all the Jewish families were terrified. They thought, this is a good opportunity for a pogrom."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview, I. Heller, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview, D.H. Feuerchtgott, op.cit.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Of course there were exceptions to these feelings of tension and mistrust.

"My grandfather had a friend, a goy, who couldn't speak a word of Yiddish, and my grandfather couldn't speak a word of Russian. But they were so friendly that on holidays he (the goy) would bring him some potatoes. And my grandfather used to send him wine and matzohs. And when my grandfather died, this old man came and cried."<sup>17</sup>

If all of this has sounded slightly subjective, one fact can be viewed objectively to judge the Jew-goy feelings. The town's one major pogrom during World War I was not participated in by the townspeople, but by the Polish army.

One unusual institution in Koidanov that reflected the progressive mood of Eastern European Jewry at the end of the 19th century, was a girls' Hebrew School. In 1900, a man by the name of Hayim Yehudah Merlis came to Koidanov from Germany, where he had received an excellent education in modern Hebrew. Merlis opened a 'modern' school. The men were still somewhat under the Orthodox influence (they regarded Hebrew as 'holy'), so the school was for girls.

Hayim Yehudah Merlis was an interesting figure by himself.

"In little towns, everyone would get a tzunamin (nickname)...He came from Germany with a cape with a big rip in the back, so they called him 'Merlis da shpalt'.... He was extremely charismatic....very handsome....a learned man. He was a wonderful orator with a beautiful voice."<sup>18</sup>

The school was a precursor of modern Hebrew education. Merlis taught Sephardic Hebrew (in 1900!). "Everything was conducted in Hebrew....it was mostly vocabulary, reading and writing... We learned Bible."<sup>19</sup> The Merlis school was conducted in his house, where he continued to educate girls until the middle of World War I. At that time he fled to Minsk. "One day the

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<sup>17</sup>Personal interview, Evans, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Personal interview, D.H. Feuerchtgott, op. cit.



Bolsheviks went to his house (in Minsk).....and he dropped dead - heart attack."<sup>20</sup>



בילד פון לערער חיים יהודא קערליס מיט אַ קלאַס פון זינגער שילעריןס

In sharp contrast to Hayim Yehudah Merlis who was the proponent of the Hebrew language, another man lived in Koidanov who was a staunch advocate of Yiddish literature. He was Abraham Reisen, the famous Yiddish writer. Reisen was born in Koidanov in 1875 and left the town at the age of eighteen. He is sometimes called the 'poet of the Jewish poor.' Abraham Reisen found many opportunities in his later life, even after he reached America, to reminisce about his old home, Koidanov, the shtetl that is

<sup>20</sup>Personal interview, Evans, op. cit.



no more.

I imagine I am a little boy...  
I have just begun to live.  
My whole world is just the "shtetle"  
And nothing more beautiful than that can be.

I imagine I am a little boy...  
I have not yet traveled anywhere.  
And what I have seen in my life  
Has, as if by magic, vanished.

There remains only the "shtetl"...  
A complete world with its seven streets.  
They stretch out in my memory  
Like sun-rayed, golden ribbons.

The shulhof is the most beautiful square!  
The synagogues - all four - I see them yet.  
Two doves over the Holy Arc,  
Two lions crouching by the praying lectern.

The stream, clear, cheerfully gurgles--  
You can see yourself mirrored in its waters.  
The windmill is the greatest of wonders.  
Its wings turn round and round.

The furthest road -- to the green forest--  
There we must go all together.  
And beyond the forest, world's end  
Whence distant seas roll on.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Abraham Reisen, "Koidanov". Translated by Isaiah Heller.  
Sefer Koidanov, p.51.