

Eye-Witness Testimony: Extracts from the Investigative Materials on Pogroms in Igumen County, 1919-1921

*These documents were donated by Daniel Chernin, whose great-grandparents, **Shmuel Krivochei** and **Anna Volman**, were murdered during the pogroms described here; the documents were retrieved from the Minsk archives by the Jewish Heritage Research Group of Belarus, and translated by Garen Hartunian. As yet, Daniel has been unable to find any death records for his great-grandparents. He would like to hear from you if you have any information about them. You can contact him directly at [dchernin\[at\]Verizon.net](mailto:dchernin@Verizon.net)*

Town of Berezino:

On February 19 1920, the regular units of the Polish Army entered the town from the direction of Igumen. Around noon time next day pogroms and looting started in town. The soldiers split into groups of five or six and began entering Jewish homes where under threat of death they took all of the hosts' valuables. The Jews who resisted were beaten to death and, in some cases, shot to death from rifles and revolvers. This is how they have killed **Movsha Cherni** (the Black) and his wife **Bluma**, **Haim Abramovich**, **Abram Gelfond** and his wife **Sorka**, **Meyer Hodosh**, **Izka Hodosh**, **Leyzer Paperny** and others. Next day the Poles selected 20 Jewish men and drove them into the river, demanding 10 kilos of gold from the commune. They've kept the poor men in the icy water for over two hours. The commune was unable to collect the required amount of gold, and the Polish officer shot the Jews right there in the river. Pogroms and the killing of Jews continued between February 19 and 23, and subsided only after the Polish soldiers moved farther east. Many Jews chose to hide at the houses of their acquaintances in the neighboring villages. There were cases when the Jews had to pay their Christian neighbors for the permission to hide in their basements. After the White Poles' departure from Berezino, the neighboring villagers and the local Christian population continued looting the abandoned Jewish homes.

Witness: **Borukh Ratner**– butcher.

On February 19 I headed to the slaughterhouse to slaughter a cow and bring the meat to the market. Three White Polish guards approached me and demanded gold. I told them the gold is hidden in my house. They escorted me to the house. On the way I saw several corpses of murdered Jews, some were mutilated. I also saw the young Jewish woman **Feiga** with a baby in her arms running in the street. Her head was wounded, probably by a saber. Running past us, she collapsed to the ground. I asked my guards for permission to help the wretch, but they hit me and I was forced to move on. Later I found out that the injured Jewish woman died waiting for help. Upon arrival home, I gave the gold to the Polish soldiers, but, instead of letting me go, they took me to the synagogue where by then there were already around 200 men and women gathered. By evening of the same day they have brought to the synagogue the local **Rabbi Avram Brodna** and ordered him to throw all of the Torah scrolls on the floor and to dance on them. The Rabbi refused to do so, then the bandits started beating him up. Those men who rushed to help the Rabbi were also beaten, and many of them remained crippled after that. The Polish officer ordered the commune to bring him 10 kilos of gold the next day. He let everyone leave the synagogue, keeping 20 men hostages, who were all shot the next day in the river. Among those who were killed by this officer were: **Aron Gilman** – the carpenter, **Vigdor Rakhmonovich** – the tailor, **Berl Sorkin** – the cobbler, **Haim-Aron Levit** – the merchant and others.

Witness: **Peysakh Charny**, town of Berezino.

On August 23, during the retreat of the White Poles, around 300 soldiers occupied the town. They have opened Jewish shops and captured all the goods from them. They have been entering Jewish homes and demanding gold. There were no Jewish murders, but the soldiers were beating the Jews up and scorning them.

Witness: **Nohim Rabinovich**. April 12, 1921

It has already been over a month since the local Jewish population had been suffering from the raids of the gangs consisting mainly of the villagers from the villages surrounding the town of Berezino and runaway prisoners from the Igumen prison. They enter the town without fear and rob the Jews, scorning them. Now the town has about 300 Jewish families, among them there are

families that fled from other towns and villages in desperation, to have some kind of protection from violence. They are mainly craftsmen and shopkeepers. The bandits kill a few Jews each time. For example, a week ago they have gathered about 25 Jews, locked them up in a barn and put the barn on fire. Among the victims of this horrible criminal act were **Srol Pres** – the shopkeeper, **Sorduh Hodosh** – the blacksmith, **David Pevsner**, **Movsha-Leib Averbukh** – the tailor. The bandits attune the local population against Jews, recruit them to join their bands, promise to share the looted property.

Witness: **Aron Simkhovich**. June 25, 1921, town of Berezino

The history of banditry in our town started last winter. The Jews passing through were frequently attacked on the road to Mogilev. Bandits robbed Jews and stripped them naked. At that time there were still no killings of Jews, but since the beginning of spring the bandits started killing Jews sparing no elderly, women, or children. The town is surrounded by a ring of murderers and robbers living in the neighboring villages. In the beginning of March they broke into the town from the Igumen direction, killed 6 Jews who happened to take the same road to the town, then looted around 50 houses, while killing 17 more Jews. In the beginning of April they have burned alive 23 Jews in a barn on the river shore, but the bloodiest pogrom the bandits staged on May 8 when the bandits counting about 100 people completely surrounded the town and began looting, killing and mocking the Jews. They were entering Jewish homes, pointing pistols at the head of the family or at his children, and demanding gold, the goods, and silver. Those who resisted, they killed mercilessly. Those Jews they have met on their way in the streets, they killed with sabers, some were shot, they cut off women's breasts and ripped open their abdomens, men were maimed, children were shot in the head. There were overall about 100 Jews killed, over 500 maimed. The town stands completely plundered and seems deserted. Corpses of several Jews have been found in the wells. 11 houses and the synagogue have been burned down. Berezino today has about 15 orphans.