

Schedrin 2008

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Much like a strong wind that knocks down trees, clears the land for habitation and then is gone; so are the Jews of Schedrin. In June 2008, I visited Schedrin with my wife and a guide from a Russian Jewish travel service operating in Minsk that had arranged for us to meet people in Schedrin. Neither the mayor's assistant, the town librarian/historian nor the older farmer, with whom we spoke, could remember the Jewish people who lived and died in Schedrin. Schedrin was not quite like any town in Belarus. It was founded by Jews, owned by Jews, inhabited by Jews and developed by Jews. Schedrin had been a Jewish town for decades. I looked at the grain growing well on the farmer's fields around the town and recalled that in 1844, the Lubavitch Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson purchased the land from Prince Schtzedrinov in Minsk and invited Jewish families to settle in a Jewish colony called Shchadryn (Schedrin) [Joseph Schneersohn In Tzemach Tzedek and the Haskala Movement 1962 p10]. The land was distributed to the Jewish settlers at no cost with every family receiving enough land for a home and farm building.

The history is clear. In the early 1900's, 95% of the people in the town were Jewish. Despite the history, their cultural remnants much like their physical remains were buried below the ground. The town historian thought that the building with the red fence might have been a synagogue many years ago but she was uncertain. The locations of the many other synagogues that had existed were unknown.

The homes in the town looked much like I envisioned they would have been during my grandfather's time. Small wood homes with stoves that would consume the wood piled up outside the house. The woman sitting outside her house conjured up images of an old woman sitting there over 100 years ago. The asphalt road and modern vehicles going through town reminded me that this was not the early 1900's but the houses had an older image.

At the edge of the town of Schedrin, off the main road and beside a dirt road was a monument in a fenced off area. The monument commemorated the execution of the Jews of Schedrin. The day before we were in the largest city of the region - Bobruisk. The most disturbing part of the visit to Bobruisk was the cemeteries. Except for the older part of the main Jewish cemetery, most of the cemetery followed the Russian tradition of etching a picture of the deceased on his/her tombstone. It was like a garden party walking amongst pictures of people with familiar last names including mine. Sadly, the large cemetery contrasted with the small number of people at Saturday morning services in a small apartment in Bobruisk that morning.

On the outskirts of Bobruisk, there was another cemetery. It was a fenced area with only a single tall obelisk like monument. No pictures of people on tomb stones. There was only a sign in the grass with the number 10,000 and two raised mounds that ran the length of the area containing the remains of 10,000 Jews killed by the Germans in World War II.

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Each German unit (according to a unit leader, SS Colonel Jaeger), "would enter a village or city and order the prominent Jewish citizens to call together all Jews for the purpose of resettlement. They were requested to hand over their valuables to the leader of the unit, and shortly before the execution to surrender their outer clothing. The men, women, and children were led to a place of execution which in most cases was located next to a more deeply excavated anti-tank ditch. Then they were shot, kneeling or standing, and corpses thrown into the ditch."
<http://library.thinkquest.org/12307/jewprob.html>

There was also a monument, at the edge of the town of Schedrin, that was, of course, much smaller than the one commemorating the execution of the Jews of Bobruisk. There must have been a sense of horror in the people who were marched, in 1941, to the area adjacent to their Jewish cemetery. Now, outside the fenced area was grass, trees and a few stones in an open area where cars or trucks occasionally drive over. It was the old Jewish cemetery of Schedrin. I found in the ground stones that were inscribed in Hebrew. They were the fragments of tombstones.

Why should I care that this area is the resting place for Jews of Schedrin? The bodies of my great grandparents were somewhere beneath the soil but the bodies of my other ancestors are buried somewhere else through Europe. This place, however, holds the remains of parents who made a most difficult sacrifice – they encouraged their children to leave them. They encouraged their children to leave a continent and find a future for their grandchildren and great grandchildren who they would never see. Their unselfish act spared my grandparents and parents the possibility of lying beside or beneath that obelisk like structure.

Although on this warm summer day, I am cognizant that I am also moving through Schedrin, without a trace, I will always carry with me a debt of gratitude to my great-grandparents and a profound sadness for others whose lives were terminated in the horror of the Shoa. We sent the town librarian some material on the Jews of Schedrin recognizing that history cannot compensate for the lost community of souls.

Simon W Rabkin





















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Slide 1. shows the monument to the Jews of Schedrin who perished in 1941. The iron fence protects the area.

Slide 2. shows an area immediately outside of the fence. This is an unprotected area and the tracks from a vehicle on the road is shown on the right as well as an old tomb stone in the distance.

Slide 3 shows an old weathered tomb stone on the ground near vehicle tracks

Slide 4 shows an old weathered tombstone

Slide 5 shows a tombstone with some Hebrew script

Slide 6 shows an area that has had vehicles clearing the ground and a tombstone on the ground

Slide 7 shows another weathered tombstone

Slide 8 shows a house on the main road that runs through Schedrin

Slide 9 shows the wood in the back yard of a house

Slide 10 shows an old woman in front of an old house on the main road in Schedrin