

BIELSK-PODLIASK

BOOK IN THE HOLY MEMORY OF THE BIELSK PODLIASK JEWS
WHOSE LIVES WERE TAKEN DURING THE HOLOCAUST
BETWEEN 1939 AND 1944.

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BIELSK PODLIASKS IN THE SOURCES AND THE BOOK
OF BIELSK : AN HISTORICAL SURVEY

I. Antiquity of the Jewish Settlement of Bielsk

According to accounts found in various documents (eg., documents of the monarchy, legal registers, etc.) we find a Jewish community in Bielsk which was already integrated into the economic life of the town by the 15th century and occupying an honorable position in the higher financial echelon of the principedom of Lituhania and the kingdom of Poland during the reign of each over the area.

It must be assumed that this growth did not take place during a short period of time, but was instead, the result of decades — even centuries. In addition, if we take into account that in 1542 a Jewish synagogue existed in Bielsk” we may say with assurance that Jews had been in Bielsk for some time in these centuries, and that there existed a community identifiable in number as well as by the consolidation of its culture, religion and ethnic distinctiveness. In these times there were synagogues which were the legacy of large, well established communities, and it is not to be assumed that this had become the situation in a short period of time.

In any case Bielsk must be seen as one of the oldest Jewish communities in Eastern Poland near the borders of what had been the Kuzari Kingdom. We may safely assume that, along with the other communities of the area, Bielsk was settled at the time of the fall of the Kuzari Kingdom in the year 969, and that its settlement was among the first.

This is not an hypothesis without basis, but it must be taken into account that the histories of all common peoples,— the Jews included — during this period are based on assumptions made in the absence of adequate documentation.

In the absence of court, municipal or monarchical records on Bielsk from this period, we must rely on Dr. Yitzhak Shafer:

“There began, following the fall of the Kuzari Kingdom in 969 an emmigration of Kuzari Jews; they strengthened existing settlements and created new Jewish settlements on the Slavic borders, and especially in the territories of Poland and Reissen... The Kuzari Jewish settlement developed mainly in the eastern provinces of Poland and in the Ukraine. the same regions which were on

the borders of the Kuzari Kingdom... All information leads us to believe that in the period of time from the 10th century until the year 1241, the Kuzari Jews lived in Reissen and the eastern provinces of Poland”.

Up to this point, our conclusions are based on the research done by Shafer and cited above.

As is known, the Jews of this area in the 10th century were engaged in the industries of forestry, agriculture and fishing, and only later entered into trade of surplus produce in the markets outside the areas where they lived.

Bielsk, surrounded by forests and vast farm lands, attracted the Jews in their hurried flight from the Kuzari Kingdom. They brought with them their humanitarian-mystic religion with its concept of the fate of a dispossessed people.

The year 1241 is depicted by Shafer and Dubnov as the year of the destruction of Polish towns and their Jewish communities. This was the year of widespread and violent Tatar raids which reached a peak in the time of Baati-Khan and cast Poland, along with its Jewish population, into a nightmare of terrors leaving in its path great destruction and suffering. According to the historical explanation, the primary goal of the Tatar raids was from the large caches of foods and harvests which were of great renown in the region. If Bielsk had become attractive from repeated raiding parties it was because of the Jews who had, “after the fall of the Kuzari Kingdom favored the agricultural areas”, (Shafer: 220) and that in this decision brought to these areas, by way of the tales of wandering merchants, the story of their industriousness.

The supposition that the Jewish settlement of Bielsk dates back to 969 is well supported by the documentation. From records of the 15th century we find Bielsk described as having a well established community of Jews with its own synagogue.

The foundations of the Jewish community of Bielsk may be dated at 1000 years or more. There is no forgiving the Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians who aided those who murdered the Jews. With their aid in the destruction of the Jews settlement of Bielsk, they sealed their own fates as well, and in their oppression of local Jews undermined their own rights to the land, thus bringing about their open degradation.

II. Business, Economy and Society in old Bielsk

It is difficult for us to determine from the documentation the exact nature of these spheres. The scientific methods of inquiry into such

features as the economy, the behavior and customs of the people and local legal systems in such historical communities has, only of late, been developed.

Other studies have been primarily the analyses of sociologists concerned with class struggles and the suppression of ethnic and national groups. In addition, there are not reliable sources upon which a description of an ancient Jewish society might be based. What may be supposed is that a national and economic sense arose from being constantly surrounded by non-Jews. Jews were forced to base their physical security on self-reliance and on mutual trust. They had to develop a judicial system — first and foremost for the continued existence of their own society — that would instill within them feelings of Jewish brotherhood; thus, cushioning them from the non-Jews who tormented them, and providing them with neighborly dependence and a mutual assurance in their personal well-being and economic security. In one word: community.

It would be wrong to assume that Jews could, even for only a single year, survive in the absence of an organized legal, ethical and religious system with only their desire to bring forth bread from the new land upon which they had chanced. This was despite their specific religious, ethnic and historical background, for here the order of things had changed — man and society — bread was the condition and the means while ethnic character was the goal.

According to Shafer "...The Jews of Poland were organized in this period (1264) into communities administered by those who were called 'the Jews' Bishops' and in internal affairs they were the judges of autonomous Jewish courts delivering judgement according to the law of the Torah."

These Jewish Bishops, also called the 'Jews' Doctors', served in their expertise in the law of the Torah as judges for the Jews. It is not accidental that the rabbis were given these titles. However, while the rabbi was concerned with ritual, and was also surely interested in the emotional factors which might impel the individual to be a participant in his society, his role as a judge did not include either the authority of police power nor the deep-rooted pedagogic intuition which could sway the masses. Still, in the eyes of non-Jews the similarity to their own bishops fit.

The logical conclusion which might be made from the existence of such descriptions is that, by the 13th century, there already existed Jewish communities with their own means of existence; i. e. taxes, clubs, an

independent town gate, a synagogue, a council with chairman and a rabbi/judge.

The title of 'doctor' for the rabbi was also not accidental. A community of refugees — oppressed and persecuted, organizing themselves in a most temporary manner on foreign lands and in forgotten corners, lacking both living conditions and food as well as proper facilities for laundry and hygiene, is stricken by pestilence and skin diseases. A band such as this is in need of cleansing its camp in order to prevent the further spread of infection which afflicts its crowded population. This type of community developed an advanced social sense in relation to the times, and the concept of a 'purified camp' in contrast to the surrounding communities. The ideas of hygiene which originated with the cleanliness of the family, the ritual of the *mikve*, the possibility of banishment, etc., had always been confusing to the non-Jews who came into contact with them. When plagues did break out and the Jews were affected to a lesser degree, it was generally interpreted by the non-Jews as the result of sorcery or the poisoning of the wells by the Jews. As a result the laws of the *halakha* and the Torah administered by the rabbis were seen as strange curing practices, and the rabbis became known as 'doctors'.

We may assume that there were, by the 13th century, *mikves* as well as bath houses maintained through payment of taxes by the community and administered by the rabbi.

As far as these features apply to the Jewish settlements as a whole during this period, it must also follow that Pielsk, as well, maintained a similar type of community. In addition from the evidence, that in the 16th century "we find there a synagogue," might we not conclude that there existed a community, active for years and over many generations?

With the passing of the first quarter of the 16th century the name of the Jewish community became established, and it may be assumed that the economic situation of the Jews there was firm. We may further assume that with the change from a subsistence based agriculture to the marketing of surplus crops and foodstuffs, that it was now possible for the Jews of Pielsk to organize their community through increased taxation.

According to Shafer (517), the Jews in the 15th century "were bringing ash, pitch and grain from Reissen and Poland, and shipping them to ponzig via Wolin and Mazovia". The reference to ash and pitch relates to the forestry industries which the Jews had developed as their specialty. When speaking of Bielsk, Reissen and Poland, the significance

of these felled stretches of forest can be seen, for the Jews were able to extract the ash and pitch used to develop agriculture through fertilization and, in industrialized areas, for lubrication.

The development of Bielsk is marked by the domination and exploitation of the area under one ruler after another. These rulers, after developing military strength, sought to conquer territories which would yield large amounts of revenue from taxation. During the 13th and 14th centuries Bielsk passed from one ruler to another, through conquest or as a political payoff. In the 14th century the town fell victim to "the crusader knight Venerik Kniford". This is known to us by way of signed and registered statements from the period.

Bielsk was then, a Jewish community which: 1) enriched the area through enterprise, 2) assured, through a well ordered tax levying system, an income for its conquerors, and 3) was the site of crusader activity in the attempt to rid Poland of anti-Christians.

Our characterization of the Jewish community of Bielsk in the 12th through the 16th centuries is one which was based, economically, on industrious farmers, enterprising merchants opening new markets, and a successful tax collection organization.

We bring these facts to light in order to show others that our forefathers in Bielsk, as Jews in other settlements in feudal Europe, were a creative and industrious element in the development and enrichment of the agriculture and productiveness of the citizens, and through their aid to the reigning authorities, ensured order for all the residents of the area. We state these facts not as an apology, nor as an attempt to justify ourselves, and certainly not in any attempt to quiet feelings of guilt. There is merit in airing these facts when, even today, there are those who would call us parasites.

We learn from the sources that in 1860 "...quantities of lumber are sent from here by water to Rega, their value being 1,700,000 rubles per annum. There are two factories producing fabrics, etc." These achievements were known as exclusively of the Jewish community.

If these had been the result of non-Jewish productivity, this type of achievement might have continued to this day, but up to the time of the last generation of Jews in Bielsk these enterprises were not entered in to by non-Jews.

III. The Continuity of Jewish Settlement in Bielsk

The subsistence of the non-Jewish settlement of Bielsk, as of all towns in Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania — having abundant forests, rich fields of grain, waterways and lakes — suffered recurrent

interruptions due to the wars and conquests of tyrants and the raiding Tartars, Crusaders and Swedes. These disruptions naturally led to the disruption of the lives of the local Jews as well. But with the resumption of the normal life of the town, Jewish life also returned to its usual course.

In addition to these, there were also interruptions in the continuity of the Jewish community only, which came as the result of the struggle between the Church and the secular rulers. Both used the Jews as scape-goats whenever it became necessary to appease the angry citizenry and to restore calm among the general population. Attacks by the non-Jewish population were also a factor which affected the Jews. One such attack came in the wake of an epidemic, at which time the Jews were accused of having poisoned the town's wells; and this despite the fact that there were also many Jews among the victims. Pogroms were the occasional method used to wipe out the debts non-Jews owed to the town's Jews, and also as a means of protesting the heavy taxes imposed by the king which were to be collected by Jewish revenueurs.

Thus we find, from the beginning of the 13th until the 14th century and again in the mid-16th and early 17th century, an absence in the record of Jewish life in Bielsk. We know for certain that the Jewish community ceased to exist as a result of the 'Black Program' toward the end of the 14th century, and again at the end of the 16th century when the Church, in its continuing struggle with the rulers, became incensed by the special privileges granted, by the authorities, to the Jews.

Until of the end of the 18th century there is no information on the Jews of Bielsk, and this may be due to the fact that, either there were no Jews living in Bielsk, or that those who were living there made no note of their presence to the outside world.

Beginning with the 19th century, Bielsk appears to have become a thriving community. From 94 in the year 1816, the population grew to 198 in 1847; 1256 in 1861 and 4,079 in the year 1897. The steady increase in the numbers of Jews in the town's population leads us to the conclusion that the fame of Bielsk as "the major town in the 'Land of Bielsk'" and the "Pearl of Podliaski" after reaching the Jews of the surrounding areas, resulted in large immigrations of Jews to Bielsk.

The Jewish community of Bielsk, greatly expanded in number, continued to exist uninterrupted until its destruction by the Nazis. For some reason, however, the number of the Jewish population was reduced at the beginning of this century. As already indicated, the Jewish popu-

lation of Bielsk in 1877 was 4,079 — some 54% of the town's population as a whole. However, the figures from the year 1921 show a reduction in the population of 43% to 2367. Since the non-Jewish population for the same period also shows a decline (4%), we might assume that the changes were the result of World War I and the racial strife which followed. The sources do not state the reasons for either the growth or the decline of the Jewish population of Bielsk. It is entirely possible that the figures, found in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, include only those residing in the town at the time of the survey, and do not take into account the many war refugees who were still in the process of returning to Bielsk. We have, therefore, some cause to question the validity of the statistics given in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* for the population figures of 1921.

Whatever the case, we do know that the Holocaust brought about the death of more than 5,000 Jews in Bielsk.

IV A Case of Blood Libel in Bielsk

At this point we should mention a tragic incident, which could have resulted in the annihilation of the Jewish community of Bielsk, had it not been for the intervention of a benevolent ruler.

It was in the year 1564 that some non-Jewish tax collectors accused their competitor Isaac Borodovka (the bearded one) of having murdered a Christian girl from Narev in order to make ritual use of her blood. Borodovka was put to death, and the entire Jewish community might have shared his fate, had it not been for the king, Sigmond August, who placed the Jews under his protection.

Interestingly enough no mention was made in this case of the use of the blood for the baking of *matzot*; the usual charge in cases of blood libel. Perhaps it is due to the fact that the accusation was made at the end of July, some three months after Passover. In any case, the indictment stated that the accused was guilty of having committed murder for the purpose of making ritual use of the victim's blood. The case is also unusual for the fact that it was rare in cases of blood libel that the accusers were able to bring the accused before a court of law and obtain a death sentence.

The Borodovka case is a reflection of the tragedy of the Jews in the diaspora. It was not Borodovka alone, rather the Jewish people as a whole who stood accused in this case. A capable and industrious people are entrusted by the rulers with the difficult task of collecting taxes, thereby helping to insure the security of the country — but the

ignorant masses are far from appreciative. How ironic that in the conflict between the individual tax evader and the needs of the country, the people do not condemn this selfish individual, but instead, band together to destroy the stranger.

It was in this way that the tragedy of the Jew always grew out of racism, ignorance and the scheming of individuals, a situation that resulted, ultimately, in the Nazi Holocaust. Incidents such as the Boro-dovka affair remain important to us as long as there remains a substantial diaspora.

V. Bielsk in the Book of Bielsk

With the destruction of Bielsk in the Holocaust which began in 1939, this memorial volume becomes the last record of a community that has since disappeared. Without this volume it would indeed be difficult to recall the image of the town and to reconstruct its life.

We state this with some reservation, knowing that the contributors to this volume were dependent on their memories in the matter, and that, therefore, their contributions may not be totally free of subjectivity. Nevertheless, we feel that we can accept this volume, a fairly authentic source, since in comparing the same details in various accounts, we found that they were treated as accurately as possible. The Book Committee took every precaution to guard against exaggerations and nostalgia in the various accounts, which is another reason why we may depend upon the material included herein.

We should also realize that because we are the generation that witnessed both the exterminations and the redemption of our people, it is incumbent upon us to memorialize the town in which we were reared. We must tell its story so that we and our children will realize what a price we paid in the attempt to have our people continue its existence in the spirit of the "Kingdom of the Almighty", without a land, without a sovereign state and the security it affords. It should serve as an important treasure, acquired with the book of our sons, the heroism of our remnant in the State of Israel, and the long suffering of our ancestors in the Diaspora.

We approached the task of compiling this volume without any preconceived notions. We handled its contents with honesty and objectivity. As already stated, we tried to avoid some exaggerations that come as a result of nostalgic feeling, but we didn't let that stop us from giving the fullest account possible of our dear ones, of their sufferings, their joys, their visions, and the purity of the society they created. This was

done throughout the volume, including the historical survey appearing at the end.

VI. Image of a Society

That which makes Bielsk unique, and reflects itself in the memoirs of those who survived, is the deep social instinct that guided and moved its people toward the creation of a community based upon mutual assistance. Both young and old were endowed with a deep sense of communal responsibility, which was to become the legacy of all of Bielsk's Jews. Through of limited means, the people of Bielsk did not want to see among them brothers who must beg for their meager existence, lowering themselves in order to survive. They realized that the wanderer's staff and pauper's bag were too often the mark of the Jewish people, who lacked a normal and secure economic base. They knew that no segment of the Jewish people was safe from this, for it came to be a recurring condition throughout the dispersion. It was therefore incumbent upon those who could to extend a helping hand and in a manner that would help the recipient preserve his self-respect.

Throughout the years of its existence, the Jewish community of Bielsk maintained a variety of charitable institutions, serving the needy in the most dignified manner. There was little notice given to those whose contributions made these institutions possible, just as the people served by them were never made to feel inferior because they required assistance.

There was the *Linat Zedek*, a society for the care of the sick. In other communities the task of such a society was to provide free bedside care in the sick individual's home, but in Bielsk the *Linat Zedek* sponsored a hospital, provided a doctor's care, as well as free medicine to the needy. Even the doctor, rejected by the Jews because of his apostasy, and hardly accepted as an equal by the Gentiles, became part of this community endeavor and served the needy Jewish sick in an exemplary manner.

No less outstanding was Bielsk's care for the stranger. It's 'Home for Wayfarers' (*Hakhnasat Orhim* or *Hekdesh*) was open to all poor, local and out-of-town, who needed a roof over their heads. In this instance, the Jews of Bielsk undertook a great deal, for they assumed responsibility for the well being of the needy stranger and cared for him as much as they did for their own poor.

Needless, to say, there was a *Hevra Kadisha* in Bielsk, and other societies, whose function was to take care of the dead in the finest traditional manner.

Bielsk also maintained an orphanage. It was a small institution, limited to 23 children, but it was the only one of its kind in the area. It should also be pointed out that orphanages were rather rare in smaller communities. Here again we see the unusual sense of communal responsibility, and the fine charitable feelings, that were so typical of Bielsk.

An outstanding achievement was the "Committee", organized by Bielsk Jewry, mentioned by many as an innovative approach to community organization. Apparently, the task of the "committee" was to centralize all charitable activities and serve as a central address for those in need, and to keep the poor from going door to door seeking alms. Begging in the streets, a degrading situation, indeed, did not exist in Bielsk at any time. All this is described in great detail in the accounts written by M. Alpert and Zvi ben Daat. Others, too, make much mention of Bielsk's charitable activities and point with pride to the fine spirit that prevailed in and around its social institutions.

It would be a mistake to assume that only the older generation of Bielsk concerned itself with the needs of the less fortunate. Though the young people were convinced that there was no future for them in their native town and made plans to leave Bielsk, they still involved themselves in its social activities. Even while on short visits from the far away places where they pursued their studies, they gave a helping hand and helped keep alive the tradition of the forefathers. The "Shublani", a Passover project organized by Gymnasium students, who came home for the festival, gives us an idea of the younger generation's devotion to Bielsk and its ideals. It helps explain their great attachment to Bielsk and its society, and why they carried with them in their consciousness the pleasant memories and abiding values of their birthplace to the far away places of their migrations.

The "Shublani" project consisted of the renting of a bakery by these young students, in which they baked Matzot for the poor of Bielsk. The flour was purchased with money collected from the better-to-do and charitable individuals in town. This fine undertaking by the young people of Bielsk reflects the saying of the sages:

This, then, was the nature of the Jewish society of the Bielsk that was.

VII. *Kehila and Rabbinate*

It is interesting to note that the rabbinate of Bielsk functioned without the controversies usually found in this community office. We find that Bielsk always had only one Rabbi. He was always a true leader of his flock, their guide and judge in all matters pertaining to relationships between men and all in accordance with Halakhic teachings. In short, all facets of community were subject to his leadership, something that was very rare in other communities. What is amazing is that numerous synagogues and batei midrash existed in Bielsk, reflecting various differences in style of worship, socio-economic classes, and the like, and yet they all seemed to accept the leadership of one Rabbi! This phenomenon may have been the result of self-control on the part of the lay leadership whenever differences arose over worship style and other matters, or to a degree of restraint out of deference to the Rabbi: the man who personified Judaism and its unique traditions.

Be it as it may, we cannot here delve further into this interesting situation, its causes and effects. We should, however, make the following assumptions. It seems that the people of Bielsk was concerned with deeds and not words, and therefore sought to avoid philosophical arguments and hair-splitting debates. Consequently, its Rabbis were outstanding men, respected for their learning, who always managed to steer the community away from petty personal and halachic quarrels and in the direction of unity and meaningful action.

The two most mentioned rabbis are Arie Leib Yellin — known as “Pretty Eyes” — and Ben Zion Sternfeld, author of *Shaananei Zion*. Both were known for their scholarship and leadership. Rabbi Yellin was one of the most outstanding interpreters of Jewish law in his time, and his fame reached many parts of the world. Rabbi Sternfeld’s popularity did not go beyond the area of Bielsk; his strength lay more in the area of relationships with governmental authorities, municipal affairs and coordination of community activities.

One must wonder why these two famous rabbins, who, without doubt, would have been welcomed by large and better known communities, lived out their lives in Bielsk. Evidently, they preferred little Bielsk over the larger and richer cities, because they appreciated the greatness of this little town, because of the sincerity and the dedication of its people. If this was so, it cannot but add greatness to the character of Bielsk’s two most famous rabbis.

The last rabbi of Bielsk, Rabbi Bendaat (Bendas), was designated

by his father-in-law, Rabbi Sternfeld to be his successor, and guided by him to the end of his days. If our contributors take little time to speak of Rabbi Bendaat's personality and qualities, it is only because they relied completely upon Rabbi Sternfeld's judgement and it is enough for them to point out Rabbi Bendaat's great piety and integrity. We are not told about books that may bear his name, about interpretations of the Law, or about innovative changes in the life of the community that should be ascribed to him. But, suffice it to say that he was the last rabbi of Bielsk; that, together with his flock, he was engulfed by the Holocaust and died the death of a martyr.

The Kehila of Bielsk, as an institution, as in other towns throughout Poland, was led by a Community Council. Its functions in a variety of areas were directed by committees and trustees (gabaim). But the Rabbi exerted the greatest control. In fact, no trustee or Kehila officer would remain in office for very long if he failed to acknowledge the authority of the man who commanded the respect of the community; namely the Rabbi of Bielsk. To be sure, these were trustees who knew how to gain the Rabbi's full confidence to such a degree that it was difficult to tell who influenced whom. But both the Rabbi and the trustees knew how and when to compromise, in order to avoid divisions and controversy, something that the community would never tolerate.

Based on the aforementioned facts we must conclude, then, that Bielsk, a fateful Jewish community, succeeded in creating for itself a system of values, the most important of which was the charitable deed. In Bielsk the needs of the community took precedence over the caprices of leaders, rabbis were treated as guardians of the community, and men were judged not by their words and eloquence, but by their deeds.

Small wonder that the Jewish community of Bielsk was able to continue from generation to generation in the life-style it chose for itself. There was something about it which we may call "the spirit of Bielsk" — a spirit that permeated the hearts of her native sons and daughters. It is a fact that even the rebels, the most extreme among her young, nurtured in their hearts an everlasting love for Bielsk.

VIII Opinions, Views and Ideological Movements

The first thirty-nine years of the present decade, when Bielsk was still in existence, left their mark on the community. It was a period of changing alues, which lead to the shaking of the foundations, traditions, and a re-examination of that which had been sanctified by generations. The varying views and ideas that crystalized themselves during

this period among Jews everywhere, resulted in ideologocal strife in most Jewish communities of Poland, and Bielsk was no exception. However, for some reason it was spared the agonies of the hatred and festering divisiveness bred by these inner struggles.

In a sense, it was a series of divisions within the different generations of the community. Within the older generation, the rift was over the attributes of Hasidism, the customs of its various branches, and the modes of life which properly direct the Jew toward path of redemption. And so, the Hasidic community was divided into several factions. (There is a peculiar story that deals with the early beginnings of Hasidism in Bielsk. It is told that a Hasid married into a Bielsk family and settled there and had once dared to use a candle from the cantor's podium to light his "tzibukh" pipe, and he was promptly rebuked by the worshippers. In revenge, the Hasid established a "shtibbel", a Hasidic house of worship, and thus Hasidism became a permanent feature of Jewish life in Bielsk).

Other, more serious, changes were caused by the different approaches to the solution of the Jewish problem. Bielsk had its Zionists, General Zionists as well as the right and left wings of the *Poale Zion* movement, as well as Bundists and some adherents to Communism. In all of these areas there was much organizational activity, social action and campaigning for funds.

The ideological debates around various political issues, Jewish problems, in general, and the question of *Eretz Yisrael*, in particular, were frequent. This, of course, led to personal involvement, and there were many die-hards who were often ready to place their movements above all else.

For a time, it did seem that, like other communities, Bielsk too, would fall victim to the antagonism and quarrels of the various factions. But soon the overall needs of the community helped bring the diverse elements together. Level-headed individuals continued to serve on the different committees that concerned themselves with the general welfare of the community, while at the same time they identified themselves with one political group or another and remained active within its ranks. In this way, they not only helped maintain unity, but also demonstrated the importance of joint action in behalf of the community as a whole.

The gravest and most dangerous battle of all was that which raged in the area of education and over the question of the national language of the Jewish people. Long after the heated quarrels had subsided in

most parts of the world, the fight broke out in Bielsk and continued, unabated, almost to its last day.

The pity of it was that the innocent children of Bielsk became the pawns of the two warring factions. The parents of these children were soon to feel great pressures. On the one hand, the sponsors of "torbuth" tried to convince them that their children should be educated in "the language of the future", namely Hebrew. The "tzisho" people, on the other hand, extolled the virtues as a living tongue and a sure means of communication among Jews, and urged the parents to give their children adequate preparation for life by sending them to the Yiddish school. For the parents, this was a great dilemma, and they had to face a very difficult decision.

The self-restraint for which Bielsk had become famous did not work in this instance. Here, the children and their future were involved. The "war of languages" went on, unabated, and widened the rift in the community. This time Bielsk, too, fell victim to the disease of divisiveness that plagued most Jewish communities. Two schools came into being, representing opposing ideologies; each seeking to extend its influence into the community.

In the long run this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. These two institutions developed in time a variety of educational and cultural activities, each serving not only its perspective group, but also other elements in the community. They established libraries and organized a variety of educational and cultural activities of the highest order. Through these activities each institution helped bring enlightenment into the culturally deprived segments of the population.

The younger generation had its own order of priorities. It should be pointed out that, unlike their parents who held diverse views as to the problem of the future, the youth of Bielsk were united through their *halutz*, or pioneer, movement and sought to shape their own destiny. Consequently the young people became less and less concerned with the community's immediate problems, which were of the highest priority as well as the unifying factor of their elders.

The generational gap was evident in many respects. Most of the young people were uncompromising in their fight for Hebrew. In elections for the various community offices, they supported candidates of their choice to the bitter end. As Zionists they were activists; they were involved in the sale of *shakalim* and campaigning for funds, and vigorously carried on cultural and information activities on various levels. Their major attention was focused on the General Halutz Orga-

nization and they were united in the task of assisting those who proposed to go to *Eretz Yisrael*, often against the wishes of their parents.

Most of Bielsk's young people identified with the Labor Zionist Movement. They joined the various divisions and factions within this movement, and promulgated various philosophies in so far as their Jewish state in the making was concerned. But it was precisely this goal that brought the various groups together, despite the divergent views they held. For example, it was not unusual to see a member of *Hashomer Hatzair* in charge of the club house serving all groups, as the manager of a joint fund, etc. In all of this, the youth showed a great deal of maturity, as behooved a young generation whose chief aim it was to prepare itself for the great task of Aliyah and living a new life in the historic homeland.

From all accounts, it is clear that the younger generation showed much concern for youth's cultural advancement. True, each organized group sought to grow in membership and to expand its influence. However, these were times when the needs of the youth community as a whole took precedence over ideological differences. All of Bielsk benefited from this mature approach, for it became a town rich in cultural activities. The various youth organizations manned libraries and encouraged young people to read and become better informed. There were those who enjoyed theater and formed a dramatic group, whose high level performances, we are told, were enjoyed by young and old alike. Mock trials of a literary nature, as well as lectures and discussions were also among the numerous activities conducted by the youth organization. All of this contributed greatly to the advancement of the Jewish youth of Bielsk.

The generational gap was evident in many respects. Most of the community, busy with its civic affairs and rich in activity aimed at meeting the various social needs of its citizens. At the same time, there seems to have been a conscious effort on the part of many in Bielsk to deal with the future that seemed bleak for many reasons, and thoughts of emigration came as a possible solution.

Surrounded by hostile elements, Bielsk was like a besieged city, with little or no chance to break out. While the Jews of Bielsk tried in many ways to improve their lot, they did so with little faith in a brighter future. They knew the history of their community and were only too well aware of the fact that their forefathers had been forced to leave Bielsk more than once. Had they been given some time, many of Biesk's Jews might have found refuge in Israel and in other lands,

and would have thus provided a solution to at least one of the many problems created by Poland's rabid anti-semites.

Polish Jews were just as eager to leave the country as the Poles were eager to get rid of them. The decline in the Bielsk Jewish population by 40% in the short period of Poland's independence may be seen as ample proof of the readiness of the Jew to leave the country of his birth. If only some of the more enlightened countries had opened their gates to the persecuted Jewish masses!

Hitler helped Poland solve her Jewish problem. But the truth is that Poland was not in need of this partnership with the crazed German murderer. Her own thirst for Jewish blood led her in this direction. Jews were murdered by Poles more than once throughout Poland's turbulent history. There are therefore no words strong enough to indict Poland and Germany for their genocide against the Jewish people. The practical conclusions we must draw from all this might be clear to us.

Let us hope that the Book of Bielsk will be more than just a memorial volume. It should serve to help us assimilate the lessons we must learn from the Holocaust, and to convince future generations in Israel that they cannot and must not ever depend on the hospitality of strange lands.



The lost grandeur of Bielsk

ENCYCLOPEDIA POVSHEKHNA (vol. III)

Angelbrand 1860

Bielsk, a district town in the Grodno County (once in Voyevudstvo Podiaski) is the main town in the "Land of Bielsk" near the river Bialeh.

In 1240 the town was conquered and reconstructed by Ardzibil Montbilovich after the retreat of the Tartars. In 1366 Bielsk was annexed to Keistot, the Prince of Trozk under an agreement with Kazimizsh the Great, Prince of Lithuania.

In 1377 the town fell siege to the Crusader Vinrekh Kniford, who, failing to conquer the town, destroyed it and burned the surrounding area.

In 1390 Yagilu Kanin awarded the town and its vicinity to Jan Starshi the Prince of Mazovietzk.

In 1507 Sigmond I presented Bielsk, together with Sorazsh and Bransk, to his sister-in-law Helen, the widow of King Alexander and daughter of Ivan Vasilivich the Grand Prince of Moscow.

In Bielsk the Lithuanians held conferences one of which is remembered in particular. At this occasion, in 1564, Sigmond August conferred with the 'leader', Yakov Okhanski on the unification of Lithuania with the Crown. It was during this same conference that the palace was destroyed by a fire which resulted from lightning.

Due to the corruption of the elders and the resulting failures of their administration, Bielsk was not granted the same rights as under previous rulers.

The Parliament, meeting in 1768, granted the town district courts. Bielsk was a fortified town.

With the annexation of Bialistok and its environs, Bielsk remained a district town, later to be attached to Grodno County.

The registers showed 3,000 persons of both sexes.

SLOVNIK GEOGRAPHICHNY

eds. H. P. Solimerski, B. Halivoski, W. Wolovski
Warsaw, 1880

Bielsk is a district town in the Grodno region near the rivers Bialeh and Lobcha, 122 miles from Grodno.

It is mentioned for the first time in the year 1253 when the Mongol commander Bati (Bati Khan) destroyed the town. Later the town was conquered by the prince of Volin, Volodzimizh, after whose death it came under control of Yazhi Lebovich. The town came under the siege of the prince of Lutzk who, for revenge, completely destroyed the town.

During the Polish administration the town suffered from the frequent raids of Tartars and Crusaders.

In the years 1495, 1499 and 1501 Alexander I broadened the rights which had previously been held (rights of Vitold — ed.) and granted the rights of Magdenburg, establishing a local council named for the Land of Bielsk.

In 1507 Sigmond I gave the town, as a gift, to Alexander's widow Anna (instead of another named Helena — ed.).

In 1542 the queen Bona added 2,385 *dist*s of forest land to the holding. The brightest period came between the years 1572 — 1529. In the year 1564 the Seim gave final approval to the states of Vilna (union of Lithuania with the crown — ed.).

During the 17th century numerous wars were fought in the area, and in 1664 the town was burned and looted. The Northern War, together with the Plague of 1710, brought about the destruction of Bielsk, which was at the time, considered to be within the region of Podliask.

With the second division of Poland, Bielsk was incorporated into Prussia, and in 1807 the town passed into the control of Russia. In 1842 Bielsk was absorbed into the region of Grodno and the district was joined to the district of Droich.

...At this time the famous council house from the 15th century still stands and nearby, also, the fortified hill bearing the remnants of the fortress (destroyed in 1563 by lightning) where the Kings of Poland once gathered before going to hunt in the wildernesses of Bialowiezske.

‘..In Bielsk today some of the older buildings still stand: the well kept juncture of the roads, the council house (*ratosh*), a hospital, the jail, the secondary school for men, the preparatory school and the teachers’ seminar.

In 1878 the population numbered 5,810 (2,756 males and 3,054 females) of which 3,968 were Jews (in the source: Israelites — ed.), 940 Pravoslavs, 895 Catholics and 7 Evangelists.

Yosef Yerushevski, author of the book “The picture of Lithuania” was born and died in Bielsk.

There are, annually, eight fairs in Bielsk.

In the year 1857 there were 122,041 Persons registered in the district of Bielsk, 11,616 of them being Jews.

...The Jews of the district in 1857 had four synagogues and 18 houses of worship.

...In 1878 there were, in the district, 15 textile mills, eight commercial breweries and 3 tanneries.

BOLSHAIA ENCYCLOPEDIA (III, IV), 1901

Bielsk — A district town near the Bilianka river. In the 16th century it was the main town in the “Land of Bielsk”. With the division of Poland it came under the jurisdiction of the Prussians, and in 1807 was annexed to Russia. From the year 1842 it was the district town of Grodno County. In 1897 there was a population of 7,461, mostly Jews.

The southwest train route branches out to Bielovtezsh. There are five factories and 261 workshop with 70 workers and output of 29,000 rubles.

In 1898 there were reported, 40 marriages, 222/122 births, a municipal hospital, a co-educational high school and an elementary school.

JEVREYSKAIA ENCYCLOPEDIA

eds. *H. Dr. Katzenelson, Dr. Harkavi*
Petersburg, 1908

Bielsk, during the period of Polish administration, was the main town of the Land of Bielsk, which included Bialistok Vojevudstvo (until 1561 it was annexed to Lithuania).

Synagogues are mentioned in a document from the year 1542: "A Jew, Ezra Shlomich gave testimony in the synagogue in the presence of a nobleman sent by the Tribunal of the King, that he did not kill even one German!"

In 1564 there was a religious trial where the tax collector, Isaac Borodovka, was accused of murdering a Christian girl from Narev. He was sentenced to death and the sentence was carried out despite the clear proof and his continuous statements of innocence. This affair resulted in a decree of Sigmond August that before a trial for the murder of a Christian child, or sacrilege, the matter would be reviewed by the King in the Parliament, "in the King's full council". (cf.: *reshimot v'kituv*, vol. 1; *arkhion russi yehudi*, vols. 1 & 11; Harkabi, *'al batal kneset u'batai tefilah b'russia, voskhod*, 1894, vol. II).

Today Bielsk is a district town in County of Grodno. In 1807 Pelkh Grodno was absorbed into Russia, and in 1842 its status change to a district together with that of Droich.

The first residents of Bielsk (in recent times? — ed.) were from Orla (1808 — 64, in 1816 — 94 persons) and as a result of this the Jews of Bielsk were under the jurisdiction of the community of Orla. In the year 1839 the Jews of Bielsk attempted to recieve the independent status of a community to administer their own share of the debt of the community of Orla (more than 4,000 rubles) from a loan made by the offices of the Roman Chatolic Church, which opposed the splitting of the debt.

In 1843 they renewed their request based on the argument that the community of Orla had, several times, misused the money. The local authorities, however, refused the request. A request in the year 1848 was also rejected.

In 1861 the district of Bielsk had a population of 7,770 Jews with 14 synagogues, 13 chapels. Bielsk itself had a population of 1,256 Jews whose principal industries were clothing and merchandise.

In Bielsk there is a co-educational government high school and a *Talmud Torah*.

The Blood Libel in Bielsk

Until the year 1561 the sale of beverages in the cities of Lithuania was given by franchise to the Jews. Prior to this beverages had been sold in inns licensed by the authorities. In this year two well known tax collectors, Isaac Borodovka and Yakov Dlugatz acquired the franchise to sell beverages in Bielsk, Narev and Klashchilia. The peasants ignored the franchise and continued, to the detriment of those holding the franchise, to brew beverages and to sell them as before. This became a source of conflict and the Jews entered a complaint to the Prince concerning the illegal sales by the peasants. Sigmond August responded (27.7.1561) by awarding to the tenants not only the right of sale but also the sole right of brewing in these area.

The resulting losses of the peasants gave rise to accusations of blood libel in July of 1564. The residents of the area delivered a complaint against the tax collector Brent Abramovitch Borodovka stating that he had murdered a Christian girl from Narev. Through torture, he was forced into making a confession to the crime, but at the time of the trial he publicly withdrew the confession announcing that the whole affair had been a false accusation resulting from the enmity of the peasants over his franchise for the sale of beverages. Despite this the local tribunal convicted him, due to the support of the local Town Elder, who sided with the peasants.

The Jews submitted a petition to the Prince that requested trials related to charges of ritual murder and sacrileges be handled by the crown.

Sigmond August considered the rights which had been bestowed of the Jews by his predecessors and concluded that the Jews did not make use of Christian blood for ritual purposes. He issued his famous decree in which he stated that: 1) a Jew accused of any one of the crimes in question would acquire the pledges of two local Jews, and, that in the absence of such pledges would be held in jail until the trial; 2) the trial would be conducted by the King's Council in the Parliament.

ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA (German)

W. Schneider ed.
vol. IV, Berlin, 1929.

Bielsk — A city in the region of Bialistok — Poland became apart of the Princedom of Greater Lithuania in the year 1569.

- ★ Jewish tenants are mentioned in Bielsk by the year 1487.
- ★ By the first quarter of the 16th century a Jewish community had been established.
- ★ In 1542 there is a record of a synagogue.
- ★ In 1564 a trial for a ritual murder took place in Bielsk. A Jewish revenue and tax collector, Isaac Borodovka, was accused of murdering a young Christian girl for the ritual use of her blood. In this blood libel he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

In the wake of this trial the Polish King, Sigmond August, published two manifestoes (1564 and 1566) stating, among other things: not to prosecute in the normal manner the crimes of blood libel, ritual murder or sacrilege but rather that these charges would be handled by the King himself.

- ★ Other reports of the Jews of Bielsk are absent until the end of the 18th century. It might be assumed that there were no Jews in Bielsk during this period. By the 19th century a new Jewish community had been established in Bielsk. It appears that Jews from the nearby town of Orla were moving to Bielsk. In 1816 there were a total of 94 Jews in Bielsk. Their community was subordinate then to that of Orla. Their recurring requests for independent community status were returned with negative replies until the year 1848.

In 1847 there were 298 Jews in Bielsk. In 1861 there were 1,256, and in 1897 4,079 Jews, or 54% of the population as a whole. In 1921 their number had fallen to 2,367, which constituted some 50% of the general population.

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HISTORY OF THE JEWISH ECONOMY

Dr. Y. Shiper — 1929

p. 216, § 50:

"...In the development of the (Jewish) communities of Poland and Reissen we are aware of two periods: the first being from the time of the destruction of the Kuzari Kingdom (969 A.D. — ed.) until the breakthrough of the Khans from Kipschek in the year 1241; and the second period beginning in the year 1241 and continuing until the Black Plague in the year 1340.

"...There is evidence.. that migrations of the Kuzari Jews began in the year 969..." They strengthened existing settlements and founded new Jewish settlements on the Slavic borders and particularly in the areas of Poland and Reissen.

"...The Kuzari Jews settlement took place mainly in the eastern provinces of Poland and the Ukraina; in the same provinces which had been on the borders of the Kuzari Kingdom.

"...All of the evidence points to the fact that during the period from the end of the tenth century until the year 1241 Jewish life was concentrated in Reissen and in the eastern provinces of Poland.

"...In accordance with the example of the West the Polish Jews during this period (from 1264 — er.) were organized in communities administrated in all internal matters of antonomous Jewish courts of law based on the law of the Torah by those known as the 'Jewish Bishops'.

"The period known as the 'Black Death' also shook the Jews of Poland. during this plague one third of the population of Poland perished (1348) and we learn from the *Olivi Chronicel* in a short, but meaningful entry, that 'The Jews poisoned the wells and springs and were therefore killed all over Poland — some by the sword while others were burned alive'. (there, 556, 130).

"...From 1463 to 1494 the bureaus of the Orthodox Church report that the Jews were tenants of almost every important tribute bureau of the Lithuanian Princedom — one finds them as tenants of the revenue-ers in Bielsk, Briansk and Grodno. In the eighties and nineties of the 15th century the annual revenue from tenants in Brestachki, Drohichin, Bielsk and Grodno ammounted to 1,100 semekh (more than 7,000 dollars) (∴ occasionally one sees Jewish contractors who formed syndicates and amassed large amounts of capital in order to acquire larger rental holdings."

VIELKA ENCYCLOPEDIA POVSHEKHNA

Warsaw, 1965

Bielsk Podlask is a city in the district of Bialistok on the river Bialeh. There are, according to the census of 1960, 10,500 residents.

There is found the production of metals, foodstuffs and building materials.

In the Middle Ages it was a fortified town. During the 13th and 14th centuries it was destroyed by invasions of Tartars, Lithuanians and Crusaders.

It was the capital of the "Land of Bielsk".

In the 16th century there were close to 3,000 residents.

In the second half of the 17th century the town was laid waste in the Swedish Wars.

In the 18th century woolen and textiles developed as industries there.

IN THE BIELSK GHETTO & THE CAMPS

Meir Peker

The Establishment of the Ghetto

After having been in the town only about two weeks, the Germans declared the establishment of a Ghetto and ordered the Jews to construct an enclosure themselves. All of us worked on the construction of the fence; boards and planks were brought from various places, and within three days a solid wooden wall was constructed to a height of three meters, enclosing an area bordered by *Beit Midrash Grass*, *Gottka Grass*, *Yagilenska*, and *Dubisch Road*.

The area of the Ghetto included not more than one quarter of the town, possibly less. After the Russians had fled the town there remained approximately 5,000 people, all of whom were confined to the Ghetto — three or four families crowded into an apartment. Within a few hours everyone had been cruelly herded into their new quarters. We had been informed, prior to the actual establishment of the Ghetto, that everyone would have to leave his home and move there. Each person was allowed to take with him those of his possessions which he could carry. The movement of the townspeople from their homes was a distressing sight: children and old people laden with bundles; each family attempting to save that which they could, lest looters take what they left behind.

In order to establish their authority over the town, and to ensure that the Jews would not dare to disobey them, the Germans took all the local dignitaries — the intelligentsia — hostage. Among the first to be taken, I remember, were: Menachem Stupinskt, Appelbaum, Melamdovitch, Luzovsky and Kusovitsky. The latter two were said to have been taken for cooperating with the Russians.

The fact that we didn't know where the hostages had been taken had a marked effect. The town, without its leadership, was left in a state of depression — no one could imagine it possible to arrange everyday affairs, to establish a relationship with the new regime, or to orient themselves to the new situation. All this added to our doubts and confusion.

The main cause of lowered Jewish morale was that the hostages were not returned, and rumor circulated that on that same day they had all been shot and buried in a field outside the town.

The first days we were left in a state of anarchy. They had locked

us in the enclosure and we did not know why they had herded us in or what they intended to do with us. By their actions they gave us the impression that they wanted to make use of something in the town for entrenchment and fortification, and that they had evicted us so that we would not interfere with them or reveal any of their secrets. I, myself, don't know what caused such thoughts, but others also felt this way. Those days frayed our nerves to the point of madness.

After a few days they appeared; order was restored and the reason for our being in the Ghetto was revealed to us.

The Administration of the Ghetto

The Germans appointed a *Judenratt* and made Shlomo Epstein chairman. The members were: Moshe Scheerln, Yakov Schneider, Lipa Slokhovsk and others who were not prominent and whose names I do not remember.

The terrible duty of fulfilling the quotas of laborers, imposed by the Germans for forced labor was delegated to the *Judenratt*. They were also held responsible for fulfilling the levies of silver, gold and jewelry imposed on the people of the Ghetto, and providing boots, woolen footwear and furs for the stores of the German army.

The *Judenratt* was in a terrible position. The Jews of Bilska, who had always been accustomed to neighborly assistance, could not now order those of their own number to become forced laborers. But what choice did they have? They could not evade the order, for if they did every Jew in the Ghetto would have paid dearly.

German directives were always closed with the same phrase:

“...Anyone not following an order or a command directed towards him, will be shot like a dog in the place where he is found.”

The headquarters of the *Judenratt* were in the *Yaffe 'Ainaiyim* synagogues. I saw them many a time, miserable and despairing, struggling with questions of morals and conscience: “How can we do this? How can we refuse?” They were all good Jews — my heart ached.

The Germans made as if to come to their aid. A Jewish police force was founded, headed by a contemptible individual from Orla, and the Germans felt they could rely on this arrangement. They knew, it seems, that Weinstein could be trusted.

I don't recall any Jews from Bilska on the force. The lowest classes of the Jewish sector had been sought out, and it was they who lorded it over us. Among their ranks were bastards — sons-of-bitches. If I

had been told that such vile beasts, capable of losing all vestige of humanity, existed among the Jewish people, I would not have believed it. There were among them some boys from Madrovitchin who licked the boots of their 'masters', the Germans. They revealed secrets, endangering the very lives of their fellow Jews, thinking nothing of their actions. They wanted only to save their own skins, but not one of them survived.

The police dragged people physically to forced labor. Sometimes they added the old and the weak to the work details, despite the fact that these people had not been designated by the Judenratt. They were not responsible to the Judenratt, allowing them to do the dirty work of preparing lists of who was to be singled out for forced labor, and after having obtained this public authorization to conscript laborers against their will, they did as they pleased with the lists. Perhaps what was said — that they had accepted bribes from some people and taken others in their place — was true. The police force, instead of aiding the Judenratt, brought unending grief. As we knew them, the men of the Judenratt could not have been capable of such treachery.

I shall never forget the most despicable act which these irresponsible police committed. It occurred as follows: when the Russians fled the town they left, in their great haste, storehouses filled with merchandise and foodstuffs. The Jews took from these stores various items for the hard times we all knew would come, and anyway, had we not taken these abandoned goods, they would have been looted by peasants or thieves. Upon moving to the Ghetto we attempted to bring as much as we could of these abandoned supplies.

During my stay in the Ghetto I kept everything concealed in my apartment. Those people who did take goods, actually brought very little with them to the Ghetto; everyone wanted to bring beds, bedding, furniture and other items, but as there were no wagons or other means of transport they carried whatever they could on their backs. It was these goods that saved the Jews of the Bilsk Ghetto, where there were no ration cards or distribution of basic necessities. This saved us and gave us hope, for if we were to continue living and survive we had to remain worthy of a normal life such as we had known. So what did these 'police' do? Somehow they found out about the goods, and immediately they squealed to the Germans. This was too much! Who would have suspected such actions of them!

There was another affair which darkened the lives of the residents of the Bilsk Ghetto and depressed us greatly.

A Polish woman, returning from Lublin where she had been caught in the midst of the changing regimes, told of a Prisoner of War camp in Lublin in which there were three young Jewish men from Bilsk who had been captured by Polish soldiers. She proposed that we give her "money with which to bribe the camp guards" so that she could bring these young soldiers home. We gladly agreed. The money was collected immediately, and the woman left and did indeed bring the three back — Barcht's brother, Radlovsky, and my own brother Michael Peker.

There was great and tragic rejoicing. It was the happiness of being together! This was our great dream, the great remedy for the families — and all this despite the fact that they could not appear openly in public. The three young men were concealed by their families, until the fact was discovered by the 'Drovitchin boys', who squealed to the Germans.

According to the story circulating at the time, the Germans took them "back to Lublin", but the truth was discovered later; the three young men were held in the Bilsk jail and forced to work as grave diggers. They did all of the 'burial' work: they buried Jews who had been shot, dead animals, and also refuse which was a potential spreader of disease.

One thing was clear however; these three were the ones 'privileged' to dig the communal graves for the Jews of Bilsk and Orla slain in one day. They saw with their own eyes the enormity of the tragedy — the horror of parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances wantonly shot. They were forced to bury them, still breathing, alive and feeling, pleading with their eyes for help.

When the three had finished their task, they too were shot by the Germans. Jewish eyewitnesses, and also people who heard the event second-hand from Gentiles of the area, corroborated the story.

The behaviour of the Jewish police doubled the anguish of the Judenratt. Despite this, they had from the beginning attempted to plead a case for the young men. "They're provincials, they don't know Yiddishkeit; they must be spoken to; if things are explained to them, they'll be good boys." However none of their attempts helped them to gain control over the police, who continued to take advantage of these prestigious Jews of the Judehratt and treated brothers cruelly. The members of the Judenrat became increasingly despaired and sought some way of relieving themselves of their position, but this was impossible, and their anguish only grew. Shlomo Epstein wasn't able to

bear the burden of the situation, and at the first opportunity he fled. But more of this later.

Economy and Community Life in the Ghetto

The Jews did not receive any instructions on how to arrange family and community lives. How could the economic problems of a community suddenly deprived of its livelihood and community-oriented work be solved? No-one dared ask why such instructions for organizing the economy of the Ghetto were not given. The Germans hinted at their aims, but without leaving any literature, and soon even the announcements dwindled. If the rumored fate of the hostages, taken without reason or trial, was hint of the relations between the Jews and the authorities, then the Germans' intentions with regard to the economy was already quite clear to the Jews.

As Bigotzky was walking to his house to fetch some flour, and he did this quite innocently, not thinking that there was any need for caution, two Germans spotted him and shot him dead in the middle of the street. They also went into the Steinberg's house while their brother was hammering on a box in preparation for rations, and they took him outside and murdered him.

Inside the Ghetto Kaddish went to get some water; some Germans standing nearby watched to see where he went, and as he began to draw water they shot him and left him lying in the street. These events had taught us that the Germans were not interested in allowing the Jews to provide for themselves. Neither ration cards nor food were distributed, and the Jews starved.

There were Gentiles who sensed the starvation situation in the Ghetto, and they began to establish ties with their Jewish acquaintances. They would call to them through the fence, throw them bits of food, and receive their compensation in the form of clothes or other goods. There were also non-Jews who would enter the Ghetto in some mysterious way and arrange on-the-spot exchange. Some brought leather to shoe-makers or cloth to tailors in order to get shoes or clothes in return. There were no craftsmen apart from the Jews of Bielsk to serve the local non-Jews, and the devastation which was brought upon the Jews caused these Gentiles much discomfort. Formerly they had accused the Jews of living off others, but now, seeing that the Jews were laboring only to survive, they went into the Ghetto to seek them out.

After a while the Jews began to leave the Ghetto as forced laborers. At the beginning most were afraid to leave the Ghetto and evaded

being assigned. However after they realized that they could get food to bring back to their families, many wangled their way into work details. I was taken, together with other craftsmen, to make clothes and shoes for the Germans in workshops outside the town.

In one respect, my situation was not too bad. I was always able to dig up a potato, some seeds, roots and plants which I happened to find along the way. Although it was only a handful of people who managed to do this, it did satisfy the needs of some of the families, but there were many who literally wasted away from hunger and who were beyond help.

Community life had almost ceased completely. Jews prayed alone in their homes — if at all. The synagogues were closed lest they become a rallying point for the Jews. The '*Yaffe Ainayim*' synagogue had been converted into the meeting place of the Judenratt and the Jewish police and the Germans stromed the place from time to time. The once favorite meeting place of friends became the scene of nightmarish terrors where murder could be viewed from every opening and every window. The Jews, who had once found the friendly mass meetings a source of life-giving strength, were now condemned to the oppression which loneliness brings.

The role of the Rabbi had become meaningless and he, aware of this fact, attempted to bring salvation through self-sacrifice. Once the situation had stabilized and there was no reason to expect any change as slowly death from starvation consumed the Jews, the Rabbi abstained from eating and began a long fast. He fasted for many days and became an invalid, his body feeble and his spirits low. He could not stand unaided, and could not walk without holding on to the wall. And so he staggered on his wasted legs, half blind, feeling his way along the walls of the houses. He spoke to no-one, and no-one spoke to him. Perhaps he felt that through fasting triumph would come; but he remained alone in this belief.

Jewish religious life collapsed completely. *Kashrut* was no longer necessary — the thought of a pure and ordered life never even entered anyone's mind. Everything came to a halt; the institutions and community endeavors became things of the past, and no-one thought of the past.

Family life was also permeated by a sense of loss and despair. Everything had been undermined; the relationship between father and son, as well as between husband and wife. The family was a unit bound by love and moral commitment, and people believed in these until the

end. Everyone knew, though, that it was only a matter of time until this institution would also collapse.

The Destruction of the Ghetto

Before its destruction, the Germans brought the surviving Jews of Orla to the Ghetto. There were maybe 200 of them, not more.

In one day all of the skilled workers were moved, with their families, to Bialystok, and the unskilled were left behind.

Lazar and Michael Dodovitch moved together with me. The workshops around Bilsk had been destroyed.

It was during this transfer that Shlomo Epstein fled. We had no idea how he did it, but he hadn't been noticed on the way, and it was only on arrival in Bialystok that his escape was discovered.

No-one could understand the reason for the move, and great anxiety gripped us all. We made all kinds of guesses, but none of us dared guess their real intent. The same day of the move, the Germans had gone from house to house distributing sacks of potatoes according to the number of persons per family. This act had left us totally confused. If they wanted, heaven forbid, to do 'something' to us, why then were they pacifying us with food? We left feeling a little easier — perhaps, despite everything, we would all meet again.

Several days later, another group of craftsmen passed us, among whom were the two Tetermans, Perez and Sima, who passed on to us the news that the Ghetto had been destroyed. They told how first the old people had been taken out of the city and killed, and then after a day or two the remaining Jews were shot. The killings took place in the cemetery, and it was there that they had been buried.

The graves were dug by the three 'Lublinars' who had been forced to witness the wholesale slaughter, and afterwards they had to bury those who had fallen, whether dead or still living. Their task completed, they too were shot, beside the communal grave.

The Ghetto had existed from mid-1941 to the beginning of 1943, about 19 months. With its destruction, not one of the Jews of the Bilsk Ghetto who had lived under the German Occupation remained, except for Lazar and Michael Dodovitch, the Tetermans, and myself. It appears that those who fled with the Soviets also survived. Of those latter, one was Walodevsky, who had been hidden by one of his non-Jewish friends, a Gentile who stood the test of friendship all along. However, when he saw that the Ghetto had been destroyed and that

the Jew he was hiding was the last to remain, the Gentile turned him over to the Germans, who murdered him on the spot.

Tribulations of the Survivors of the Bilsk Ghetto

As I said, before the complete destruction of the Bilsk Ghetto all of the skilled laborers had been taken to Bialystok. At first we worked in the workshops, and later we were transferred to a place on Yarovsky Street in an area called Petrashai, which had been a type of recreation center for needy children. We were housed in the drab shacks which were already there. A few days passed and we had not yet been put to work in our trades. Then word got around that we were to be transferred to Treblinka to work.

I prepared a bunker not far away, and there concealed myself with my wife and eight-month-old child. I thought that maybe the Germans would leave after disposing of the Jews of Bialystok, and I could then come out of the bunker and find a way of escape. It was also said that only the Jews who had been brought to Bialystok would be transported and that the Jews of Bialystok would be left behind. If this was so, then my wife, my child and I would also remain.

From our hiding place we could see the Germans going from house to house and removing the refugees, as if from a precise list. Literally hundreds were gathered together and transported, but it appeared that these numbers were insufficient. They returned for a day or two and announced over loudspeakers that the workshops would remain for shoemakers and tailors, and these tradesmen could come out and begin to work, so this is what we did.

On the way Sender Picotzky said to us: "Go and tell your brother, he is hiding in a bunker some distance away and hasn't heard the news." I met with my brother, Ely. He told me that while in the bunker his baby had begun to cry and that those hiding had been forced to gag the child, and the baby choked to death. They were forced to take the dead infant outside and bury it, and in doing so had been discovered by the Germans. The Ukrainians came and beat them mercilessly, and finally brought them, wounded, to Petrashai.

Actually, the Germans had lured us out so as to do away with us too. What caused them to leave us, in spite of their intentions, remains a mystery.

The following day they announced that shoemakers and tailors were being taken to Bilsk, and we were taken to the Bilsk Ghetto. We worked in the shoe factory on Rozhensky street accross from 'Linat

Hazedek'. Lieberman was the foreman and things weren't too bad; above all, we were alive.

Two weeks passed quietly with decent working conditions — when the Germans needed our work they related to us according to our usefulness. After these two weeks however, they began to taunt and ill-treat us — they claimed that we were hiding unskilled workers. It irritated the Germans to think that a Jew continued to live despite his lack of usefulness to them. Someone informed on Shlomo Epstein and another Jew whom I had taught something of the trade, and whose work I had corrected in addition to my own work. I don't mention his name for personal reasons.

A similar case was that of Aron Glachinsky whom we had all liked and had taken in to live with us. He was a strong optimistic lad and he kept a small radio under his bunk. Nobody knew how he had obtained it, but he was always bringing news reports. Most of these were encouraging — as if of his own desire.

After the denunciation, we were moved, for the third time, from the factory back to Petrashi. This time we were put into a barbedwire enclosure and guarded by blood-thirsty Ukrainian murderers.

For pleasure, these Ukrainians would drink themselves into a stupor. The Jews, injured and starving, sat outside all day not blinking an eyelid, and following every movement of the Ukrainians, suffering random beatings. When finally things quieted down and the drinkers had passed out, the guard also having stretched out and begun to snore, they made good their escape. Some of them fled to the forest, and were not discovered, but the more unfortunate ones were captured and suffered greatly.

I had contemplated escape, but because of my small child, could not see us succeeding, and so we remained. There were a few other families in the same position. It was my misfortune to have to stay and see what befell those who were captured by the murderous Germans.

A girl who had fallen behind the escapes, was caught, and in the course of the terrible tortures which followed, admitted that she had broken through a board in the toilet against the fence, and escaped. They tore out her hair and poked out her eyes with their fingers, and when she had already lost consciousness, they killed her.

There was also a young man who had returned of his own accord. It seems that he was frightened of going into the forest and believed that they would pardon him and allow him to go back to work in his trade.

He was, undoubtedly, afraid of the Gentiles in the area, as he had handed over the roving Jews to the Germans. With his capture, the beastly and vicious tortures began. The German in charge of the Ukrainian guards broke the boy's hands, first one, then the other, joint by joint. This done, two Ukrainians stretched him out on a chair, still half conscious, and broke his back; they then laid out his lifeless body, like an empty sack, and emptied their rifles into it.

I saw these things with my own eyes, and curse the day on which I was forced to witness such bestial atrocities. For many days this picture would not leave me, the face of the bound youth, contorted with terror from the tortures, the eyes protruding from sockets as if they were two superfluous items detached from the face. It is hard to forget.

At midday a train arrived and a German with a stick separated the prisoners, some to the left, some to the right. I was parted from my wife and child. A Russian guard, one of the P.O.'s a Gentile as good as any Gentile, was pleased to announce to us that those on the right were to be taken to a labor camp, and those on the left to Treblinka. He already knew our fate. I never saw my family again.

The Camps and Liberation

All of those sent to the right, and I among them, were men. We were transported first in cattle cars to Maidanek. At this camp there was a large bathhouse. We had already learnt from Aron Galchinsky's radio what Maidanek was. We were immediately frightened, for we knew this was the end, and when they ordered us to strip and enter the showers we all felt that death was only a moment away. It was straight from the showers to the crematoria — that's how they did it.

At the entrance to the bathhouse sat a cruel, fearsome-looking German. He gave his orders in the form of slaps and kicks. I had found some dollars, apparently thrown away by some Jew before his death. Some people had also found gold rings. We dug a hole and buried these things so we could retrieve them if, by some chance, we did return from the showers. As they stripped us, word circulated that there were not really showers, but gas chambers. But what could we do? We went.

As it turned out, it was really only a bathhouse. We exited from the other side, naked, without any material belongings. We received clothes, apparently those of previous victims. The clothes were not distributed according to proper size, and everyone looked ridiculously

misshapen. A tall man would receive the pants for a dwarf — wide and short; a short man would get pants which hung down over his feet, and he would stumble as he attempted to walk. I received the pants of a ten year old child. We think of clothes as being a trivial matter, but the Germans, in their cruel way, knew that they could demoralise people by dressing them like the village idiot or a broken beggar. It was a crushing situation.

I could not tolerate it. I threw down the pants I had been given, and in so doing endangered my life. I jumped back into line, and succeeded in getting pants my own size. My joy was boundless. It may seem ridiculous, but to this day I can still remember the joy of having saved myself from the humiliation of wearing clothes not of my size.

After this sadistic episode, some order was made of the distorted and ridiculous. There were Jews in the camp from various places. The Germans ordered all shoemakers, stitchers and tailors to move to the right side. The group which formed was quite large, and aside from myself, there were no shoemakers from Bilsk. I befriended Patek as well as another tailor from Bilsk named Hayat. We were constantly together, each man was a source of strength to the other, and together we arrived at Belsen, where we were for eight months.

That winter an epidemic of typhus broke out in Belsen, and many died from lack of medical care. My friends Patek and Hayat among them. I also fell ill, but they still needed me so they gave me medical care. It was by chance that a German officer passing through the quarantine room noticed that on my chart it was written that I was '*Schuster Meister*' — a master shoemaker.

He called over the man in charge of the patients and ordered him to save me. I was given one injection, and I recovered. They did not want to waste one shot needed to save those who were not needed.

The next day I left the quarantine room and, according to orders, was made to run to the gathering place for those who were 'necessary'. I was so weak that I could barely drag my legs. I fell behind. From the distance I could see a German, and I knew that if he were to intercept me, he would trample me, so I gathered all my strength and ran. As I approached the meeting place, I almost fainted.

The shoemakers were rounded up and sent to Paliashow near Krakow. After four months, as the front approached Krakow, together with the crushed and retreating German army, we were sent to Maut-hausen in Austria.

When we arrived in the camp, there was a pile of bread. Although

we were all starving, no one dared to take even a slice without the order being given. I couldn't resist. I was so tired and hungry that it didn't matter any more if they killed me. I grabbed a slice of bread and ate it. As I was eating, I bit into something hard; I spit the dough into my hand, to discover a gold coin. I hid this coin, and guarded it as if it were a symbol of life itself — a symbol sent from heaven. I figured out how to guard my new-found 'wealth' I hid it in my daily bread ration.

From Mauthausen we were taken suddenly to Mulk in the Tyrolean mountains, where we worked in a sub-terranean munitions factory. I cleared the rubble after the German demolition teams finished deepening the tunnel.

After Mülk we were again moved, this time to Avenze in Austria. I felt that I could no longer endure the hard labor, and gave my gold coin to a Jewish *Kapo*, who transferred me to the shoe-shop.

Prior to the liberation, they had planned to take us to the crematoria. We learned this from the same *Kapo*, who said that they wanted to liquidate all of the witnesses to their atrocities so that we could not testify against them at their trials.

At midday I hid myself by digging under the floor of one of the shacks. There I remained day and night. A few others did the same, and we survived to see the others being taken to the crematoria, only hours before what would have been their liberation. They all knew what the Nazi beasts and their Austrian helpers intended, but there remained neither the strength to resist nor the will to live. Maybe they believed that the Germans would be defeated before their time would come. Surely this must have been their reasoning.

There was a tunnel under the mountain at Avenze. The Germans, not having strength left to murder us with their own hands, tried to lure us into the tunnel, claiming to want to "protect us from the American bombing". Suddenly they became friendly and spoke gently to us; but we preferred to remain in the open. We suspected that they had concealed explosives inside the tunnel, and that when we had entered, they would detonate them, burying us alive.

We did not enter, and within an hour was indeed an explosion and the tunnel, along with everything and everyone in it disappeared.

We saw that the Americans were coming, and so did the Germans. Suddenly a German *Kapo* appeared, a bloated primeval beast whose cruelty included the bare-handed murder of dozens of Jews. Suddenly he had become weak and emotional and he began to plead with us

not to turn him in for he had "done many favors for the Jews to whom that madman Hitler had sought to do evil". As he finished his pleading three boys overpowered and killed him, here in the same camp where he had been sole ruler.

We killed every one of the German oppressors who fell into our hands before the arrival of the Americans in the enclosure of the camp. This was our revenge for our loved ones whose blood had been spilled at the hands of these heathen German beasts.

It was only by a stroke of luck — even if tainted luck — that I had survived. For all this I have felt indebted to all of our martyrs to tell the terrible truth of what was done to us by the German beasts. I have told only a small part of what we suffered. As for the remainder, there could never be strength enough to recall it all.



Dearest children of Bielsk — Where are they ?

I. SEMIAT

Smithtown, N. Y.

SHABBOT IN A SMALL TOWN IN RUSSIA
BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Who but a poet or a painter can describe or paint the holiness of the day or even the preparations for that day. So, not being either, I will endeavor to give you my impression of that day, sacred to us, in my shtetl.

To see or feel the greatness of that day, you had to live in a shtetl in Russia within the Jewish community. But we will never see that picture any more. Those wonderful people were all lost to us in the German gas chambers, over six-million of them.

The Shabbot really began on Thursday night. There was a baker in town whose business was baking bagels each evening of the week, but on Thursdays he baked Poshladkis (onion rolls) instead of bagels. At that time there were no ice-cream parlors or cinema theaters in the shtetl and the young people spent their evenings waiting in the bakery for the fresh bagels to come out of the oven on a long stick, or for the poshladkis on Thursdays. You could overhear their conversations on different subjects, news of the day, literature, and mostly about the revolution in Russia.

The poshladkis on Thursday night were the beginning of the Shabbot custom. When the citizens of the shtetl came home on Thursday evenings they were served by their wives a tzimis cooked of turnips. On the following day, Friday, another departure from the other days of the week, lunch was served with a krupnik (a stew of grits and meat and poshladkis). The day was called *Erev Shabos*, which means Shabbot eve. But this is an expression that cannot be likened to say other holiday eve or occasion. There was something special to *Erev Shabos* which defies comparison. You could only feel the advent as something special, the Shabbos.

In the street you could get the odor of gefilte fish cooking. That was a Saturday must. The streets were being swept by a number of prisoners from the city prison under the watchful eye of their jailers. Bakeries preheated their ovens for the Shabbot cholent (A Shabbos meal of meat, potatoes or barley), also the kugel was cooked there. After Shabbos morning services the cholent and kugel were claimed from the bakery and served for lunch. As you know, it is forbidden to cook

on the Shabbath. Through windows you could see tables covered with white tablecloths and two challas and a bottle of wine ready for the Kidush as the Shabbath begins on Friday at sunset.

Now, I would like to tell you how one man in our town prepared the Shabbath on *Erev Shabos*. His name was Reb Leib, for short Leibl. He was a Gemorah teacher in the Talmud Torah. On Friday, about noontime, the classes were dismissed and Leibl came to my parents' house with a mission. There were not many families who owned a daily calendar. We owned one. This calendar has a separate page for each day of the year with much information besides the Russian and Western European dates, the Jewish months and dates, the name of the Sedrah or portion of Saturday's reading from the Toarh, the Haftorah of the week, and the exact hour and minute of sunrise and sunset. And this was very important for Reb Leib to know to usher in the Shabbot and when to say the morning and evening prayers.

After having marked this information on a piece of paper with a stub pencil, Reb Leib went to the Railroad Station where there was the most accurate clock in town. He checked the time and made sure his watch agreed. On his way home from the railroad station, if anyone stopped to ask him the correct time, he would take the watch out of his vest pocket, open the cover, look at it and say: 22 and one-half minutes past one. He worried that whoever asked him for the time should not *Mechalel Shabes zein* (delay the Shabbot by even a half-minute and thus have an aveira, a sin).

Reb Leib's next visit was to the public bathhouse. As did any pious Jew, he had to clean his body to be ready to greet the Shabbath. About one-hour before sunset, all dressed in his Shabbath best, beard nicely combed, he started again for the railroad station where the business street started, and ran for about a quarter of a mile. He then walked to the first store on the street and shouted to the storekeeper, "Farmacht de krum" (close the store). Within minutes the storekeeper obeyed. He repeatd this ritual down the street to the last storekeeper. Everyone obeyed. But the storekeepers at the head of the street sometimes complained why he did not start with the stores on the end of the street so they could get some more business, to which Reb Leib had the proper answer, that the Messiah will arrive on the white donkey from their end of the town and they would be blessed to see him first.

On Sundays the stores had to be closed 'till noontime, when the services in the chuches were over. But as you can surmise, the storekeepers were reluctant to obey. When the police sergeant walked through

the street and ordered the stores to close, they obeyed, but as soon as he went past, they reopened. And the sergeant threatened the storekeepers that the next time he would bring along Leibke, then they would have to obey.

The Shabbot was holy. No smoking, no cooking, no walking great distances, no lighting a lamp or candle. There were many no's. The Rabbi can give you more information about it.

But I will tell you about another custom. We Jews are forbidden to carry anything on Shabbot, no matter how light or heavy the article, in a *Reshut Horabim* which means in public or open places. In other words, you could carry things in your own house or yard, but not in the street, it is open country. What makes your home and yard private and not open country? The walls, the fence and the doors, a private closed property. So, in order to be allowed to carry cholent (the Shabbot dinner) from the bakery to the house, or carry a Talith to the Synagogue, or other articles of use, there was found a remedy. The city was closed. The ends of all streets were closed with an overhead wire. That made the city private property. *Reshut Yochid*. But how do we know that the wire, which is called *Airuv*, is not broken or removed by someone?

There was another pious man in town by the name of Reb Berl. He walked on Friday to inspect all the *Airuvim* to see that they were in place. If one was broken or removed and could not be replaced before the advent of Shabbot, he notified all the *Shamoshim* sextons of the Synagogues, to announce at the Friday night services about the *Airuv* break. And this was a minor calamity. Well, to take the Talith to the Synagogue was easy. They put it on under the coat, a handkerchief was wound around the waist and it became wearing apparel. The pocket watch was left at home. But how about the cholent, how to get it home? But, a child under Bar Mitzvah age was able to bring the cholent home. And if the child was too young, an older person carried the child with the cholent, the reason being a child was not considered an object or parcel.

Reb Berl, when he felt that he became too old to do this sacred work, decided to go to Eretz Israel to die there, so that he would not subject his bones to roll underground to the Promised Land. Many elderly Jews went to Eretz Israel (Palestine) to die. After being driven from Eretz Israel for over two thousand years, Jews still considered it their homeland and wanted to be buried there.

The Shabbot Day was something special. I have never seen anyone anywhere keep the Shabbot according to God's command as the Jews

did in the shtetl in Russia. I will quote 20 8—11: "Remember the Shabbath Day to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor and do all the work. But the seventh day is the Shabbath in honor of the Lord thy God; on it thou shalt not do any work, neither thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day, therefore the Lord blessed the Shabbath Day, and hallowed it".

This is the exact text of the Fourth Commandment according to the Bible. Buisnesses, stores, shops, offices were closed. No one was smoking or even writing on that day. As I mentioned before, no cooking, no lighting or extinguishing a candle or a lamp was allowed.

There was a public tea house in town attended by gentiles, and if anyone wanted to get boiling water for tea on Shabbath, he paid for it on Friday, received a voucher for a two or three-kopek tea pot, and called for it on Saturday. A Jew was not allowed to even touch money on Shabbath.

The Shabbath is called *Malka* (Queen). Does any other religion call its day of rest, Queen? And is the day of rest revered as a Queen? At Friday night services it is greeted as a Queen and on Saturday night it is bidden farewell as a Queen with a meal called *Maluve Malko* (Farewell to the Queen).

I have many memories of the Shabbath and I will end now with one. As you all know, each Saturday during the morning prayers, between Schacharit and Muesaf, a portion of the Torah is read. The Torah is divided into 52 Sedroth (sections). Beginning with the Saturday after *Simchta Torah* (day of finishing read the last section), the first section beginning with Genesis is read and so each Saturday the following section to the end of the year is read.

As you know, no business transactions are allowed on Saturday and money is not handled on that day. But one business was going on in the Synagogue. *Aliyuth* were being sold. The first part of the weekly reading belonged to a *Kohen*, the second to a *Levi*, the third (Shlishi) to the Rabbi or to the most learned one in the congregation. Seven portions in all plus the last one — *Mafter*.

Before beginning the reading of the Torah all the *Aliyuth* were sold to the highest bidder. The sale was an auction and the highest bidder received the *Aliya* for which he bid. No money passed. No bookkeeping was conducted. The *Shamoth*, sexton, conducted the sale

and he remembered to collect the agreed price during the week. I remember that even on Yom Kipur an auction was held, but the tune of the auction call resembled the Yom Kipur Torah reading melody.

The two most expensive Aliyoth were Shishi, the sixth and Mafter.

The reading of the Torah is the most important part of the services. As you know, we were given the Torah before there was any dogma of ritual. So to interrupt the reading of the Torah is a grave transgression. But here you will see that the Jewish religion, ethics and compassion are above everything.

If a man or woman were wronged by Society or by any individual in town, he came to the Synagogue on Saturday (on Saturday the Synagogues were always well attended) and before the scrolls were taken from the Ark, he mounted the *Bima* (pulpit), banged his hand on the top of the table and annouced, I am *Meakev Hakriah* (It means, I am restraining you from reading the Torah ; I have been wronged. *Musaf*, a part of the morning prayers could not be said and the congregation was forced to listen to the complaint of the wronged party and to find a solution to his problem.

This shows how even before democracy was born in Eastern Europe, we practiced it in full.