

## Russian Civil War



Gomel had a very large Jewish population (over 60% around the revolution time) and many Jews supported the revolution and were authorities in the Soviet government. During the Russian civil war there were also Jews on the White side, so you had “brother killing brother.”

There is a very famous part of Gomel history during the Russian civil war when White army officers took the town. The local Soviet authorities were in a building trying to resist until the Soviet army came. But by the time the Soviet army came it was too late and all of them died. There is a plaque in tribute to those who died (see picture) and if you look at the names you will see that almost all of them were Jews. There were several unidentified people that were killed and are listed as “unknown” and there is a sad joke in Gomel that “unknown” is also a Jewish name.

When they say that Jews didn’t support the Soviet Union, that’s not true. They played a big part. When the Soviets first came, the Jews supported them and many Jews were in positions of authority. But over the years less and less Jews remained in positions of authority. These people are remembered in town and streets have been named after them. For example: Kaminisky, Putchkin, Aurobak, Langer.

**Paul Zoglin note: These are the names on the plaque (thanks to Rimma Dechter for the translations):** Ratner, Sundukov, Otto-Gertner, Kapelnitsky, Tekrinsky, Raskin, Shevelev, Kamenitsky, Kamenko, Grozniy, Bochkin S., Frid M., Biletsky N.S., Auerbakh, Podgorniy, Lange N.I., Kaganskaya P., Pesin Z.B., Komissarov S., Faynshmidt L.D., Fishbeyn J. Unknown person, Unknown person, Unknown person, Unknown person, Unknown person

## Prayer House



This wooden building was the Jewish prayer house during the Soviet period. They were even baking matzah here.

The neighbors here were not Jewish and there was a very high official living in this neighborhood. Even though he wasn't a Jew he decided he would close his eyes to what was going on. He was the reason they didn't get caught.

When the Soviets came here in 1921, they closed the synagogue. The Torah and all of the books were buried. During the War, non Jewish Belarussians took care of the Torah and books. When the Jews returned after the war they gave them back the Torah and books.

## **World War II period**

During World War II Gomel was the last big town in Belarus that the Germans took. There was more than one month from the time they took Brest and the time that they came here. Gomel was a very big city at that time. Most of the Jews that wanted to leave had time to leave. It wasn't just an evacuation of people. It was an evacuation of factories as well. So when they evacuated the factories, the Jews who were working in the factories also left. The percentage of how many people were killed and how many Jews were living here was a small percentage. Most of the city was destroyed during the war. They say that only 15 big buildings were left. Many small private houses survived but very few large buildings.

## **World War II Museum Award**

This street was named after a woman whose name was [Polina Gelman](#). She was a Jew and she was a pilot during World War II. She was part of a special group of women that were flying very small aircraft. They were civilian aircraft that could fly very close to the ground. Their bombs could be very precise but they were easy to shoot down so they flew only during the night. The Germans called them the night witches. Göring ordered that they be shot even if they had to lose 15 aircraft. She became a hero flying in this group. Every military academy studies the special way they were flying in the night flights. In Latrun, Israel, there is a museum for the Jewish soldiers in World War II. The museum thought there should be awards for Jews of World War II. They decided they would put on this list only those who were dead. Then they had World War II veterans see if they agreed with the list. The veterans said there was one problem: there were no women. They were all men. So they needed to find a woman who was a Jew and was a famous hero of the Soviet Union. But they couldn't find anyone who was dead. So they decided that she could still be living and Polina Gelman was chosen. She is famous person in the Soviet Union and Israel.

## **After World War II**

After the War most of the Jews came back to Gomel. But after 1989, most of the Jews left. Most of them moved to Germany, United States, Canada and Australia. From 1991 to 2000, Israel took more than a million former Soviet citizens and about 100,000 were from Gomel.

Today there are about 600,000 people in Gomel. It's the second biggest town in Belarus. There aren't good statistics for the number of Jews today in Gomel. There are probably about 5 or 6 thousand. The town is prosperous if you don't take into consideration the problems with the whole economy. Some towns that don't get enough money from taxes have to borrow money from the government. Gomel doesn't need to borrow money from the government. It gets enough from taxes.

## Synagogue



This is the one synagogue left in Gomel, Beit Yaakov (originally Rosh Pino). It was built in 1894. The community that is running it is Orthodox but not Chabad. Before the revolution there were about 18 synagogues and 42 Beit Midrash in Gomel. When the communists came the synagogue was taken for their needs. During Perestroika the Jewish community asked the government to give them back the building. Eventually the government sold it to them for \$10,000 which was very cheap for this area.

In 2006 Rabbi Zholudev became chairman of the Beit Yaakov community. Since then there have been regular prayer services. There is a Sunday school where about 50 boys and girls learn Jewish history and traditions. They organize different seminars and trips to Jewish places in Belarus. They provide kosher food. There are 4 families who keep Shabbas and eat kosher food. Many other families try to do something such as light candles.

In 2008 they had the first traditional Jewish wedding in almost 70 years. That family has had a child and the Brit was performed on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. In 2008, 45 boys made Brit Milah. When they first came those boys knew practically nothing about Jewish history. Many of them didn't even know they were Jewish. For Pesach, 2009, the synagogue rented a canteen and made kosher food and had about 150 people.

The Rabbi married his wife several years ago but a couple years ago he decided to have an official Jewish wedding and a very famous rabbi came to Gomel as an honor to him. All of the furniture in the synagogue was made by the Rabbi. He is not only the head of community but he is also a business man.

The synagogue building is also home to other Jewish organizations such as the Chesed, Sokhnut,.... They work with many Jewish and non-Jewish organizations in Gomel. They have a young staff. Many are volunteers. They want to make the Jewish life in Gomel like it was before the revolution.

There is an old cemetery in Prokofska (sp?) that is overrun by trees and rubbish. A group of youngsters have taken about 10,000 pictures of headstones and have created a web site. People can search for relatives and ask to clean the headstones or make a new headstone.

## Jewish School



If you look inside you will see a two floor building. That small building is the only Jewish grade school in Belarus. It's not a private school. It's financed by the state and it's an official Jewish school. Everything (food, salaries....) are paid by the government. It is the only school in the former Soviet Union that is paid by the government and has the official status of a Jewish school. There are other Jewish schools but they are financed by individuals or organizations. People can donate to the school but the main financing is by the government. It's not only Jews who study here. The Russians and Belarussians send their kids here. Sometimes they will even give bribes to get their kids in here. Even though the school tells them that the boys have to wear a kipa and follow the Shabbas and study Hebrew, they still want their children to go here. It's because they have very good teachers and they treat the students very well and the government has a good relationship with the school.

More photos of the Jewish day school (thanks to Adar Belinkoff for these photos):



## Chernobyl

Radiation is not something that you see or feel. Probably there is radiation but where can you see it? You will feel it some 50 years later. Kids in the early 90s were sick, but now the radiation is not so intense, so you don't really see it. People get used to it. People are normal and if your kids are healthy nobody cares about it and so nobody talks about it on an everyday basis.

\*\*\*\*\*