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Janow – a Town in the District of Drohitzin

Janow developed into a town in the first half of the 17th century, before the Cossack riots in 1648. In an enactment from 1623 listed in the record book of Lithuania, the congregation of Janow is not mentioned, even though it is among the settlements rejecting domination of Pinsk. From this we can infer that, at that time, there still was no established Jewish community in Janow. And there is a foreign language document from 1678 that also lists the communities around Pinsk that objected to its domination in which Janow is listed. It therefore seems that the Jewish population of Janow became an established community between 1623 and 1678.

Additional evidence about Jewish residents of Janow in the 40’s and 50’s and 60’s of the 17th century allows us to further pinpoint the date of the establishment of the Jewish community of Janow. The first evidence of a Jewish resident is from 1646. It is told that the merchant Jacob ben Abraham of Janow, who went in the summer of 1646 to the fair at ---- was attacked and injured while traveling by a Polish nobleman and his assistants, and was thereby prevented from participating in the fair.

Tradition among the Jews of the community has it that a common grave in the old Jewish cemetery of the town is the burial place of Jews who were killed by the Cossacks in 1648, but we have no specific evidence of this. It is possible that Jewish refugees from Pinsk were captured and killed near Janow and buried there. If indeed there was a Jewish cemetery in Janow in 1648, this would mean that there already was an established Jewish community in Janow at that time. In a document from 1657, it is told that an army of hundreds of cavalry from different lords attacked the Jews of Janow and robbed them. In the years 1657-1667, the residents of Janow and the surrounding area suffered attacks by units of the Polish army that rebelled and the town itself was plundered and its houses burnt down. During that period, Janow became financially dependent on the financial help of the Council of Lithuania. In the records of the state, we find acknowledgement from 1667 or “accusations of lying in the Janow community regarding robbers.” It is almost certain that this refers to the rebellious soldiers.

From all this, it is apparent that Janow had an established Jewish community around 1648 and that it was subject to the leadership of the major community of Pinsk. The latter appointed the tax collector for the Janow community. Merchants from Pinsk could do business and settle freely in Janow and the appointee of the rabbi of Pinsk for Janow had to be approved by the head of the court also. Conversely, in times of trouble, the major community of Pinsk had to help out the subsidiary community.

Very little is known of the activities and businesses of the Jews of Janow until the end of the 19th century. From the few foreign language documents available to us, it is known that the Jews of Janow supported themselves from trade and were also involved in leasing land and in the manufacture and selling of liquor.

An article by a Polish intellectual appearing in a newspaper in 1781 praises Janow for the orderly houses [Ed: and unknown adjective] of its inhabitants. In 1784 on his visit to Pinsk, the last king of Poland, Stanislav August Panistowski, came to Janow. In a Polish editorial from the 1870’s, it is stated that the Jews of Janow are leaders in trade with Warsaw and supply it chiefly with butter, known in Warsaw as “Lithuanian butter.” Also mentioned is that Janow over time had been the private colony of the duke of the house of \_\_\_\_\_ and then passed to the control of noblemen of the house of Orzeszko.

We have little about the private lives of the Jews of Janow. The father of Grand Rabbi Aharon of Karlin, founder of the Karlin Hasidic sect and student messenger of the “Magid” of Mezeritch, was Rabbi Jacob, whose origins were in Janow where he was a sexton in the synagogue. In the Genizah of Stolin in the court of the rabbis of Stolin were found decrees of the Mishna learning group of Janow from 1830 signed by Rabbi Aharon II of Karlin. From this it is apparent that Karlin Hasidim were in Janow before 1830. The court of \_\_\_\_\_\_ had Hasidim in Janow and in 1886, Rabbi Aba’le, brother of Rabbi Laibele, rabbi of the Hasidic sect of \_\_\_\_\_ settled in Janow and established his own court. From that time, there were Hasidim who remained affiliated with Rabbi Laibele and some who followed Rabbi Aba’le. Each group established its own synagogue.

Starting with the 1880’s there is more information available about the activities and businesses of the Jews of Janow, their private lives and their problems.

The Jews of Janow by and large earned their livelihood in trade and as craftsmen. The stores in the marketplace were all Jewish owned, mostly small concerns. Larger merchants established trade ties with larger cities such as Pinsk, Warsaw, and Lodz. In Janow, there were also many craftsmen, including tailors, shoemakers, saddlers, furriers, carpenters, builders, tinsmiths, locksmiths, and blacksmiths. A few rose to prominence in the professions.

The Christian citizens of Janow, the local farmers, and the landowners were involved in agriculture and raising cattle, horses, pigs, poultry, and fish. Around the city were large forests. Janow was a center for trade in agricultural products: rye, oats, flax, potatoes, various types of lumber, fruit, mushrooms, leather, furs, bristles, etc. Lively business in these products was conducted mostly at the fairs and market days.

Economic difficulties brought about an exodus to various cities in the Ukraine and also to the United States of America. The exodus continued over a large area until the outbreak of WWI. Financial support from relatives abroad played an important role in the support of many families.

In 1880, correspondence to the publication “Homelitz” publicized scandals and chaos in public affairs, neglect of education, the changing of the old House of Study that threatened to descend into a state of tumult, horse-trading, and contention. The neglect was greatest at the Talmud Torah which was run on public funds. After a number of years, in correspondence published in 1887, the measures are set down in accordance with which the Talmud Torah’s affairs were now conducted. The officers of the charity box established four tutors as teachers in the Talmud Torah and appointed over them supervisors from among the most respectable and learned of the community. In the meantime, attempts were made to modernize the classrooms, and the study of “Hebrew in Hebrew,” Russian, and mathematics were conducted.

In the 1890’s, a large fire in Janow destroyed about 50 houses of Jews and also the old House of Study. In place of the wooden houses that burned down, houses of stone and wood were built new, and in place of the old synagogue, a new house of study was built with many improvements.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were six synagogues, the Great House of Study, the Tailor’s Synagogue, and the synagogue of Rabbi Joshua Eliezer – these were the Misnagdim (Orthodox and opposed to the Hasidic movement). The other three were Hasidic: one for the Hasidim of Stolin, one for the Hasidim of Libshe, and one for the Hasidim of Rabbi Aba’le which split off from the court of Libshe.

In Janow, there operated a charity society, a society that clothed the needy, a society for secret aid, Passover provisions, a hospitality society, and a society for visiting the sick.

In the 80’s and 90’s, there were only a few members of “Lovers of Zion,” the climate in town was opposed to Zionist ideas. From among these Lovers of Zion, there rose to prominence Jesse (Israel Judah) Adler for whom today’s town Jesse Heights (Ramat Yishai) is named. In the beginning of the 20th century, Zionist activities grew, shekels were sold there along with Keren Hayamet stamps and shares in the Colonial Bank. In those days, Chaim Weizmann came to Janow and asked the Zionists to select a representative to the Russian Zionist Congress that was to assemble in Minsk in 1903. In addition to the Zionists, the organization “Brothers and Sisters” was active from which arose a local branch of the “Bund” but their influence was minimal.

In Janow, the following served in the rabbinate: Rabbi Joseph Janover (1755-1825), a native of Pinsk; Rabbi Abraham Abba, the second son of Rabbi Samarich who was the founder of the Libshe dynasty in the mid-1800’s; in the second half of the 1800’s, the son of Rabbi Samuel Avigdoe Tosfaah (who was the famous rabbi of Karlin until 1866); Rabbi Joshua Aryeh Leib, author of the book, “Mitzpeh Aryeh.” It is known that in 1888, Rabbi Moses Chaim, son of Rabbi Judah HaCohen, head of the yeshiva of Bobruisk, was invited to be rabbi. After him was the rabbi of the Misnagedim, Rabbi Dovid Mogid of Janow. His successor was Rabbi Joseph Kosovski who served until his death in 1940. Rabbi Abraham Judah HaCohen served as counselor until about 1920 and was succeeded on his death by his son, Rabbi Joseph HaCohen.

In 1915, the German army captured Janow. Almost all the Russian populace fled with the retreating army, but the Jews stayed. A unit of the German army encamped in Janow. The Germans immediately appointed a mayor and organized a local police force; compulsory service was levied on the younger citizens. Parts of the lands of the farmers who fled were given to the Jews of the town for agricultural work for the needs of their families. During the period of German military rule, sidewalks were built, streets were paved, and attention was paid to sanitation issues. The Germans also built a railroad for their own use that connected Janow with Kanin-Koserski in north Volhynia. Besides this, various enterprises were established: a lumber factory, locomotive repair shops, grain processing plant, fruit and vegetable drying plant, a rope factory, a shearing factory, grain silos and others.

In November 1918, with the end of WW I, the Germans left. In 1919-1920, the town changed hands several times and was ruled in turn by Ukraine, the Bolsheviks, Poland, the Bolsheviks again, and finally in the summer of 1920, Poland. Prior to this last period of Polish control, riots were instigated by a unit under General Bolochowicz, but unlike other areas, they stayed in Janow only a short time and did not have the opportunity to pinpoint Jews for abuse. In the summer of 1920, the Polish army came to Janow and began to oppress the Jews until the government assumed full power in the area and quelled the riots.

During this period of change, the Jewish populace suffered. In 1919, aid from the Joint Distribution Committee and relatives abroad began to come in, relieving their plight.

BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

In the year that the town was under Polish military rule, the Polish soldiers continued to oppress the Jews. They cut off beards and sidelocks, imposed fines, administered floggings, and wrongly imprisoned Jews. After rule passed to civilian hands, different offices began to function. In 1921, a civilian mayor was appointed and life gradually returned to normal. Shops reopened, craftsmen plied their trades, and fairs and markets returned on a regular basis. Many families made their living from the train station, for it had become a junction point in the main Pinsk-Brisk-Warsaw route with a competing route to Ivaczebicz-Tolchan-Lubaishov-Kamin-Kasrilski in Volhynia. Jews with initiative established a large lumber factory next to the train station and employed hundreds of workers. In the 1930’s this lumber factory served as a training ground for pioneers to prepare them for a life of labor in Israel. Flour mills were also established, some of them automated.

In the summer of 1929, a large fire burned down 75 Jewish homes in the center of the city in the area facing the rows of shops in the marketplace. There was also substantial property loss because of looting by local farmers who were coming to the marketplace for the market day. Many Jews lost everything and were left in poverty. Also destroyed were the Jewish bank, the Tel-Chai library, and the welfare and health insurance office. The damage was estimated at the time to be 1.5 million zloty.

Recovery was quick; the ruler of the Drohitzin district obtained large loans from the government and insurance payments enabled them to rebuild. Nice and spacious wood and brick homes were built. A power plant was also built that provided electric lighting to homes and to the streets. The Brisk-Pinsk highway, which intersected the main street of the town, was paved. Jewish merchants exported grain and cattle to the rest of Poland into Danzig, factories expanded and multiplied, the lumber factory exported wood products and wood for construction, merchants from Poland’s larger cities came to do business, and traveling agents of all types came to contact merchants.

In 1924, a public cooperative bank was established whose purpose was mainly to help merchants, craftsmen, and others in need of easy credit. The bank was overseen by a central cooperative board. The bank weathered the crisis of the great fire of 1929 and the worldwide depression and operated until September 1939.

In 1922, or just before it, a new school of education (chinuch) opened, which was a branch of the culture network. Most parents sent their children, boys and girls, to it; and the traditional cheders became more and more empty. In the school year 1928-1929, the school was closed because of budget problems and most pupils transferred to the public school. In 1933-1934, the school reopened and operated until September 1939.

 In the 1920s, the teachers attempted to organize the cheders into a religious school of “insight,” but failed.

At the end of the 1920’s a brand of the Yeshiva Beis Yosef of Pinsk opened. It attracted some students from Janow and the surrounding area and youngsters further away. It did not attain a strong standing and folded.

At the end of the 1920’s, branches of most Zionist youth movements operated in Janow, including: Pioneer and Young Pioneer, Conservative Zionist Workers, Freiheit Dror, Liberal Zionist Workers, Hashomer Hatzair, Zionist Youth (originally known as Hashomer Haleumi before the 1930’s), and Beytar. These organizations introduced educational and cultural activities, mostly in Hebrew. Public lectures by emissaries and speakers of the various movements drew large crowds and stimulated lively debates. Liberal Zionist Workers established a library of Yiddish works; Conservative Zionist Workers and Freiheit organized a library of Yiddish and Hebrew works and lent to all who asked. A few of these groups established drama companies who presented plays to a wide audience. In the 1920’s migration of pioneers to Israel began. In 1929, a preparatory kibbutz for pioneers was established.

In 1937, the rising anti-semitism in Poland reached Janow. Two attempts were made to injure Jews, but a defense group of young Jews averted the attempts. In one incident, the perpetrator was beaten unrecognizably and a number of Jews were tried, convicted and sentenced to terms of confinement.

WW II

In September 1939, the Red army entered and in little time established their new rule. The Zionist organizations ceased operations. Although some members of these groups tried to hold secret activities, the NKVD found out and brought an end to them. Yiddish replaced Hebrew as the language of instruction in the school of culture.

Under Soviet rule, factories, businesses and houses of well-to-do Jews were nationalized and their owners had to find other quarters. Some well-to-do people from Pinsk came to Janow when their property was nationalized and they were forbidden to remain in Pinsk, which now became the capital of the district. On June 20, 1941, 20 Jews and their families were arrested. They were well-to-do people whose property was nationalized or who were prominent businessmen. They were sent to Siberia and were thereby saved from the fate of all the rest who remained and were subsequently murdered by the Nazis.

During the Soviet occupation, the rabbi of Janow, Rabbi Joseph Kosovski, died. His replacement, his son-in-law, Rabbi Zalman Bosel, died with his community when the ghetto was liquidated on 13 Tishrei 5703 (September 24-25, 1943).

On June 25, 1941, units of the German army reached Janow. The Christian populace greeted them with bread and salt, while the Jews shuttered themselves in their houses. According to the instructions of the Germans, the Christians were forbidden from having any relationships with the Jews and from selling food to them. They were even encouraged to beat Jews. It was decreed that Jews of ten years and older must sew on to their sleeves white patches overlaid with blue stars of David. A curfew was set for Jews from 6 PM to 8 AM. They were forbidden from using the sidewalks and were allowed to walk only in the middle of the streets. The penalty for violation of these decrees was death. For about a month, though, the Germans did not attack the Jews of Janow.

On August 4, 1941, at dusk, the Polish/Ukrainian police assembled about 150 Jews and brought them from their homes to the market square and commanded them to get on their knees and wait. The Jews stayed in place until dawn except when they were commanded to sing and dance. In the morning, they were all freed.