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**JEWS IN TUROV:  
HISTORY OF A SHTETL  
IN MOZYR'S POLESYE  
R E G I O N**



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## Table of Contents

From the Author .....	11
Introduction.....	19
Chapter I. Our Roots	
Legends of Olden Times .....	23
The Nature and People.....	41
Family .....	51
Religion.....	72
Jewish Education .....	92
Work Outside the Shtetl .....	104
Fairs .....	127
Korobka Tax.....	139
Regional Court .....	150
Military .....	158
Fishing.....	170
Medicine .....	181
Fires.....	192
1905 Revolution .....	207
Emigration .....	218
Chapter II. Between Two World Wars	
Pogroms, 1918-1921 .....	255
Zionist Movement.....	284
Decline of Cheder .....	308
The Soviet Yiddish School.....	316
Economic and Cultural Life.....	341
Public Health Services .....	386
Struggle Against Fires: Soviet Approach .....	399
Land Management and Collectivization .....	417
In Search of Happiness – To Crimea.....	445
Periodicals.....	458
1936 Constitution.....	469
Communist Activities.....	481
Routing of the Jewish Religion.....	513
Repression .....	554
Chapter III. The Soviet-German War	
Evacuation and Flight .....	594
Front, Partisans, Destruction of the Community .....	628

Chapter IV. Post-War	
Return to Peaceful Life, Restoration of town .....	661
Conclusion .....	695
Supplement	
<i>Turov Jewish residents' lists:</i>	
Mozyr region participants, the 1907 Russian State Duma elections.....	700
Students of the Jewish elementary school, 1920.....	703
Victims of the Bulak-Balakhovich's pogrom, 1921 .....	704
Merchants and handicraftsmen, 1921 .....	707
Voluntary fire team members, 1924.....	708
Small crafts industry members, 1925.....	710
WW II veterans, 1941-1945.....	711
Genocide victims of Nazis and their collaborators, 1941-1942.....	725
Post-1945 residents .....	733
Gennady Shlyapintokh poem, «Jews did not remain ...».....	735
List of illustrations .....	736
Dictionary of Terms .....	742
Dictionary of Abbreviations.....	753
Bibliography	
Archives .....	755
Books, monographs and referred articles.....	757
Encyclopedias .....	769
Periodicals.....	769
Dissertations (Ph. D. Thesis).....	770
Name Index.....	771
Geographical Index.....	793

## Introduction

Turov is more than one thousand years old, and for the last three hundred years, Jews have been a big part of its history. The formation of the Belorussian nation at the end of the eighteenth century was connected to Jewish life, inseparable from the socio-economic structure of the northwestern part of the Russian Empire.

The peculiar features of the Polesye, an area of swamps and wetlands, left it virtually untouched until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Mozyr *uyezd* (historical district) of the Minsk *guberniya* (historical province) was the most vast but least accessible part of the Polesye. This was a country of virgin woods and rivers, with four-fifths of the territory impassable – a real “kingdom of bogs.”

The Belorussians and the Jews got along. The Jews were artisans, leaseholders, fishermen, prospectors in the timber industry, peddlers, trade middlemen and merchants, medical attendants, attorneys, innkeepers and carriers. The Belorussian cities of Pinsk, Karlin, and Stolin were cradles of Jewish scholarship, philosophy and science. Turov was the second largest Jewish center in the Mozyr Polesye, after Mozyr. Its Jewish community was attached to the Pinsk district of the Brest province of *Rzeczpospolita Polska*. Three hundred sixteen Jews lived in Turov in 1765, 1,447 in 1847, and 2,252 in 1897 representing 52.3% of the general population of 4,290 people. After its annexation by Russia in 1793, Turov attained the status of a shtetl of the Mozyr *uyezd*, and was included in the Pale of Settlement.

The majority of Turov's inhabitants regarded their shtetl as the center of the universe, with three synagogues serving as bridges between the past and the future. There were more than ten minyans and numerous cheders in the region. World War I and the Revolution of 1917 shook Turov. Power repeatedly changed hands in a short period of time: the German occupation authorities were replaced by the Central Rada of Hetman Skoropadski, which replaced the Directorate of Petlura, which in turn replaced the Polish legionaries, who were ultimately replaced by the Bolsheviks. Turov, near the Polish-

Soviet border, was consequently subjected to Bulak-Balakhovich's pogroms and gangs of false atamans (Cossack chiefs). Two thousand two hundred-seven Jews lived in the shtetl in 1923, 35.5% of its general population; 2,171 (40.3%) in 1926; 1,788 (35.5%) in 1931 and 1,528 (28%) in 1939.

In writing this book, my goal was to use the Turov Jewish community to create a comprehensive image of a typical Jewish shtetl in the Mozyr Polesye. A shtetl (Belorussian – мястэчка, Polish – *miasteczko*, Lithuanian – *miestelis*, Ukrainian – містечко, Yiddish – *shtetl*) was historically formed as an urban center, with a population of not less than 500 inhabitants, whose main occupations were trade and handicrafts with a per capita income of not less than 50,000 rubles per year. Only 140 Belorussian shtetlach met these conditions. These shtetlach were divided into three main categories: rural, private and urban, where the Magdeburg rights (laws regulating the degree of internal autonomy with cities and villages) were not applicable. The private towns were owned by rich magnate (noble) families. In most cases, they were villages but could also be small towns. Later, a few of these shtetlach attained city status; the majority became villages.

During its time, the shtetl was the ideal type of settlement because it combined all of the advantages of rural life with the achievements of urban civilization. Different religions (Christianity – Orthodox, Catholic, Uniate; Judaism, and Islam), ethnic groups (Belorussians, Jews, Poles, Tatars, and Russians), and languages (Belorussian, Yiddish, Polish, and Russian) coexisted. The most common and pronounced interaction was that between the Jewish and Christian customs.

The history of Jewish settlements in Belorussia has long interested researchers. The shtetlach greatly influenced the economic and cultural landscapes of Belorussia and the cities spread their influence to the rural areas. Inclusion of the Belorussian *guberniyas* in the Russian Empire made it difficult to control the local administrative, economic and military organizations – often for financial reasons. Collections of statistics and topographical descriptions of the area were published which contained data about the number of shtetlach, population description and economic development. The materials collected by the officers of the General Staff, and the seventeen-volume Military Statistical Review, enriched the available source materials about the shtetlach. Attention in these publications was primarily on the *guberniya*, *uyezd* and little towns, whereas data about the shtetlach was rare. One can study the shtetlach in collections of materials on the history of education in Russia from the archives of the Ministry of National Education, from such periodical journals as *Zhurnal Ministerstva vnutrennikh del* (Journal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), *Zhurnal manufactur i trgovli* (Journal of Manufacture and Trade), *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshchenia* (Journal of the Ministry of National Education); newspapers *Minskie gubernskie vedomosti* (Minsk Government Bulletin), *Vilenski vestnik* (Vilno Bulletin), *Russkie vedomosti* (Russian Bulletin); and memorial books of Minsk province, *Evreiskaya starina* (Jewish Olden Times).

Before the 1917 Revolution, the first analytical publications about the shtetlach were descriptive, including ethnographical and local lore. In the 1920s and 1930s, the analyses were of an applied, social and political nature. A considerable gap in these studies followed due to changes in Soviet national policy. In the 1970s, any publications

about Jews, except for criticism of Zionism, Judaism and the Bund, became impossible. Cold War propaganda turned the Jews into an undifferentiated mass whose only hope of salvation came from the West. Interpretation of the status of the Jews as victims of the Soviet regime extended to the historical past. As a result, the Jews of tsarist Russia were perceived as disenfranchised martyrs. This, in turn, brought the study of the Jewish shtetl to a halt. Full fledged research of the shtetl as a phenomenon of Jewish life in Belorussia became possible only after collapse of the USSR. There are now two theses on the topic of Jewish life in the Belorussian shtetl, one in Belorussia,<sup>1</sup> and one in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers examined the Jewish presence in Polesye in publications about the northwestern territory of the Russian Empire as a whole or the Minsk *guberniya* in particular. The Jews of the Mozyr *uyezd* and *raion* (district) were seldom written about. Only recently have studies appeared about the Holocaust during the Soviet-German War. Historians and polemicists preferred to speak about the rich historical past of Turov – omitting the fate of its large Jewish community or giving it scant attention. Instead, they discussed the interaction of the Jewish community with the Belorussians, Russians, Ukrainians and Poles. The end of the civil war after the Bolshevik Revolution significantly impacted Turov's demography due to the new regime's militant communism, the brief NEP (New Economic Policy) period, the first five-year plan, and the Cultural Revolution. In the prewar decade, Turov's Jewish population stabilized, with those who accepted communism moving up the Communist Party leader, Komsomol, trade unions or in administration.

The Soviet authorities saw a solution to the Jewish question in "societal revolutionary changes." Synagogues, lay-led congregations and cheders were forbidden, and trade and craftsman's enterprises were nationalized in favor of "a 'just' world system". Malcontents were subject to social ostracism, fired and arrested. Nevertheless, Turov maintained shtetl attributes until the 1940s. The Soviet-German War of 1941-45 scorched Turov, with more than eighty percent of victims being Jews. The Holocaust irrevocably changed the fate of those Jews who managed to escape. The German policy of genocide destroyed the traditional demographic pattern in Belorussia. Places of dense Jewish inhabitancy vanished, the migration process intensified, interest in the Yiddish language diminished, the rate of intermarriages increased. On the other hand, the Holocaust strengthened the remaining Jews' national self-awareness. Few Jews returned to post-war Turov. The majority went to Zhitkovichi, Mozyr, Lelchitsy, Gomel or Minsk, or left Belorussia completely. Nowadays, there is nothing to remind people of the past Jewish presence. Turov resembles many other Belorussian shtetlach and towns, which formerly were enriched by Hebrew traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Sorkina, *The Shtetl's role in socio-economic and cultural development of Belorussia at the end XVIII-the first half of XIX Centuries*, Ph.D. Thesis, Y. Kupala's Grodno State University, Grodno 1998.

<sup>2</sup> A. Zeltser, *Jews of the North-Eastern Belorussia in between World Wars, 1917-1941*. Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003.

Committee supported my work, which I conducted at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center of Tel Aviv University, I examined, in national and ethnic contexts, historical events on the scale of the shtetl, *uyezd*, *guberniya*, *raion*, *oblast* (province) and *okrug* (a type of administrative division). This study, covering 1800 to the 1960s, consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, which also describes contemporary Turov.

I use the Yiddish letter «hey», which is absent in the Russian language. The guttural sound, intermediate between “g” and “h”, and close to the Belorussian “g”, is represented by the Latin letter “H” or “h”. Boris Bykhovsky kindly translated from Yiddish to Russian.

Most information is cited for the first time, the majority uncovered in various archives: seven Belorussian, seven Russian, one Ukrainian, four Israeli, and two American.

Special attention is given to graphic representation with portraits, family pictures, maps and rare documents. All are intended to give a vivid picture of the Jewish community, using Turov as an example. Some of the material previously appeared in various academic and popular editions in Israel, the US, Belorussia and Russia.

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